空ろの箱と零のマリア2

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Maria Otonashi
音無麻理亜
繰り返しの世界を作った箱・"拒絶する教室"での長い時間を、一瞬と過ごした、毅然とした美少女。とある目的で"箱"を追い求めている。
Kazuki Hoshino
星野一輝
特異なまでに日常を愛する少年。「何でも望みを叶える箱」の頒布人"0"の観察対象として選ばれてしまった。
4月7日(火) 宣言
「どんなに時を経ても、お前の側にいる――と以前に宣戦布告したが、どうやらそれはまだ続くようだ」
彼女は、周りの生徒たちが避け、台風の目みたいにぽっかりと開いた空間の中で、僕にそんなことを言う。
「私は『音無麻理亜』です。よろしくお願いします」
あの繰り返しの世界で名乗っていた『音無彩矢』という呼称を、もう彼女は名乗らない。
そりゃそうだ。彼女はもう、『音無彩矢』という幻影になる必要はないんだから。
だけど――僕は、ふと思う。
『けれど私は強くない』
そう僕に言った、彼女はどこだろう?
あの〝転校〟の一回目に、弱音を吐いた彼女はどこだろう?
その彼女を誰も知らない。誰も出会うことができない。
だから僕は、目の前の『音無麻理亜』を、どう呼んでいいのか分からない。

4月23日(木) 教室
Ryu Miyazaki
宮崎 龍
優等生で頼りがいのある、一組のクラスの学級委員長。
Daiya Omine
大嶺醍哉
銀髪にピアスをつけ、高圧的で不遜。しかしかなりの切れ者でいざという時に頼りになる一輝の友人。桐野心音とは幼馴染み。
Haruaki Usui
臼井陽明
お調子者で陽気な野球部員。さっぱりかだが友達思いの熱い面も併せ持つ一輝の友人。
Riko Asami
浅海莉子
入学式以降、突然発生した「音無麻理亜ファン」の一人。強気で明るい少女。
「誰かさんを見てるとまったく勉強になる。自分本位なしつこさというのは、最も鬱陶しいものだってことがな」
そんなことを、醍哉は思いっきり浅海さんの目を見ながら言う。
「……ケンカ売ってるの？」
「なんだ、自分本位な行動だと自覚あっての振る舞いってことか？　救いようがないな」
「こ、この……！」
なんで醍哉は誰彼構わずあんな態度なのかな……。
「ははは、あんまり付きまとうと麻理亜ちゃんに嫌われるかもしれないから、気を付けろってことだよ」
陽明がフォローになっているんだか分からないフォローを入れる。
「うっさい！　そもそもアンタ、麻理亜ちゃんとか馴れ馴れしいんだよ、バカ」
がなる浅海さんの頭を、陽明は妙に優しい笑顔を浮かべて、ポンポンと叩く。
「背が低いからって子供扱いするな！　気安くあたしに触るな！」
でも、陽明は浅海さんの文句を無視して、頭を叩き続ける。
「はあ……。この人に何言っても無駄か……」
「そう、俺に何を言っても無駄だぜ！」
「堂々と言うことかよ……」
僕はふと、二人を見ている視線に気付く。
委員長の宮崎くんが、不機嫌そうに二人を見ていた。
宮崎くんは不意に僕を見て、無表情で言う。
「いつも楽しそうで羨ましいな」

電話を切る。

心臓の鼓動が収まり切らないあたしは、ベッドに飛び乗って、枕を顔に押し付ける。

「どうしよう……どうしようどうしよう!!」

枕の中に言葉を押し込めて、ばたばた暴れる。

嫌じゃない。嫌だったらそもそも悩まない。

でも友達だと思ってたんだ。そうやって自分の中で線を引いてたんだ。

それをカズくんは、もう許してくれないってこと……？

だったらもっと早く言って欲しかった。今の関係が壊れてつらくなる前に言って欲しかった。

なんで今更になって言うの……？

あたしのことが、好きだなんて。

5月1日(金) 告白

電話を切る。

私はクッションの上に座り、頭を抱える。

どうするべきか、私にはまるで分からない。

「……く!!」

男女である以上、こうなる可能性を考えていないわけではなかった。

それでも私は、何の根拠もなく、一輝ならば大丈夫だろうと勝手に思い込んでいた。

その思慮不足が、もしかしたら一輝を傷付けていたのかもしれない。

どうしてだ？　私への感情など、どんなものであっても抱かないのがベストだ。

それなのに、なぜよりにもよって、そんな愚かな想いに囚われてしまったのだ？

私のことが、好きだなどと。

——幸せとは、なんなんだろうな。

Designed by Toru Suzuki

Prologue

I am surrounded by scenery that I can only remember in my dreams.

I already know who the person facing me is, but without a *box*, I cannot deliberately recall this place except in my dreams. For that matter, I can't remember when this conversation occurred.

"Do you remember that I told you that I can see *you* as an individual even though your kind doesn't have any distinguishing features?"

I don't know. It feels like I have heard this before, but it also feels like I haven't.

"Thanks to what happened this time around, I am beginning to recognize why I can distinguish you from the others. It might be that, while rejecting nothing, you also don't accept anything."

This all sounds like mere semantics to me.

"First off, the *everyday life* that you never tire of mentioning is different from the *everyday life* perceived by others. You include the loss of things in your perception of *everyday life*, am I right? This is, in fact, different from the common definition of *everyday life*. Other humans <u>are unable to take things as they come</u>," he says with a smile. "All humans are distorted, and their *everyday lives* are twisted by their individual values. You could say that a *box* forces such distortion upon others. You are sensitive to these intentional distortions of *everyday life* by others' *boxes*—and you find them repulsive. Am I wrong?"

I really haven't the slightest idea of what he's talking about. Leave me alone already…

"This time around, your body was attacked directly, but even so, you managed to retain your 'self' without being affected by the values of the *owner*. That is because you intuitively recognize the distortions of others. And when you know that something is distorted, you naturally wouldn't accept it, would you? However, your ability to detect those distortions is orders of magnitude greater than that of an ordinary person, and because of that—<u>you cannot accept anything</u>."

I can’t help but frown, but he insistently continues.

“Your field of vision is terribly small compared to mine. But those abilities… Aah, I see. You might… resemble me.”

Please stop.

You are disgusting.

When I say that to him, he laughs and changes his ever-malleable appearance to that of someone quite familiar.

Mirroring my very own appearance, O says:

“May I interpret this as distaste for the same thing?”

That’s not it!

We don’t resemble each other at all!

April 29th

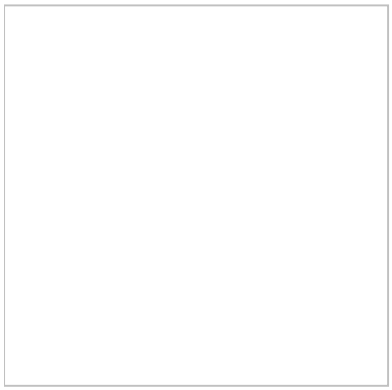
4月29日(水)
昭和の日
4月30日(木)
5月1日(金)

April 29th (Wednesday) 00:02

The first day begins.

April 29th (Wednesday) 23:57

The first day ends.



April 30th

April 30th (Thursday) 00:00

The second day begins.

April 30th (Thursday) 12:37

Lunch break has started.

My yawn just now might have been caused by the mysterious call I received at six o’clock this morning:

“I’ll make you a boxed lunch today.”

The call was terminated, however, before I could even respond.

What is she up to now…?

It’s the last day of April, and that means Golden Week—our long vacation—will soon begin. I am currently waiting for Otonashi-san in the corridor like I do every day. We normally eat lunch together in the school cafeteria; she has never made me a boxed lunch before.

“Kazu-kun! Did I hear Haru right?! A home-made lunch à deux with Maria is waiting for you?!”

It’s getting noisy. Kokone steps in front of me, followed by a grinning Haruaki.

“…Haruaki, didn’t I tell you to keep quiet about it to spare me all this trouble?”

“You did, but I’m free to obey or not!”

What an awful friend.

“Kazu-kun, what’s the deal with that exciting special event?! Details, please!”

“…well, don’t ask me why, but I got a call this morn—”

“A wake-up call?! All lovey-dovey, aren’t ya!”

Please let me finish.

“A wake-up call…” someone murmurs behind me, causing me to spin around.

…Oh no, another bothersome girl has arrived.

“Ah, Rikorin. ‘Sup.” Kokone says.

“Good morning…”

The girl with that strange nickname is Riko Asami, a short freshman with a short haircut. She is a classmate of Otonashi-san's and a member of the Maria Otonashi fan club that has been flourishing ever since the school entrance ceremony. The two of them usually come here together, but it seems like Asami-san came ahead of time today. Maybe it's just me, but her expression and voice seem even gloomier than normal.

Asami-san is absent-mindedly gazing at me.

"…Um?"

Or is she scowling at me?

"You're getting a boxed lunch from Maria-san, I heard?"

"Y-Yeah, I guess so."

Asami-san doesn't say anything in response and keeps staring at me.

"……If only the batteries in your cell would explode… if only you were using batteries that were as obviously dubious as those cheap ones from overseas… burst, batteries, burst…!"

Her mumbled curses give me the creeps.

"B-But why did she choose Kazu-kun of all people, right?" Kokone cuts in with a smile in an attempt to ease the rapidly spreading tension. "'cuz of that, Kazu-kun's been getting really scary looks from the guys, right? I heard he's topping the list of 'People I'd Love to Kill by Faking an Accident!'"

"What's with that deranged list… who on earth would come up with something like that…?"

"I did!" Haruaki raises his hand. "Of course I handed in a vote! I can't stand how you're all lovey-dovey with Maria-chan!!"

I almost fall over in shock.

I'm sure Haruaki is just joking, but lately, the looks I've been getting have certainly gotten scary. Although I don't think Otonashi-san is the only reason this has been—

"Mh? Why are you looking at me?" Kokone asks.

"……It's nothing."

I bet she has no idea that my being so friendly with her is probably a factor as well…

Kokone just cocks her head. After the eternity we spent within that unchanging classroom, she's finally switched her hairdo to a ponytail bound

on one side. A “side-ponytail,” I suppose?

“Say say, I’ve been wondering: How did you tame Otonashi-san?!”

“Now, ‘tame’ is really not the right word…”

“Otonashi-san must be used to being hit on, so you didn’t use any typical run-of-the-mill methods, right? Ah, I got it! You somehow made her believe that you were her special, fated love!” Kokone says triumphantly and starts to make some wacky comments. “Let’s see… you might have saved her from some pervert who attacked her… Oh, doesn’t that sound plausible?! The pervert was like, ‘Hey sweety, your navel fluff must smell terrific… Wha! Now if that’s not a scab down there! B-But I don’t care!!’ and right when he was about to charge at her as he murmured those words, you swooped in to save her from his evil clutches, right!?”

“I wouldn’t have the guts to fight off a *true* pervert… wait a sec, we aren’t even dating!”

That’s just the plain truth, but Kokone’s grin just gets broader.

“Sooo, how do you explain that incident at the opening ceremony, mm? Mm? Mmmm?”

“We—I—”

I know only too well how everyone has misunderstood that *declaration of war* during our school’s opening ceremony. I absolutely have to come up with an explanation and wipe that giant grin off Kokone’s face.

“That’s just, you see, because Otonashi-san happens to be a peculiar—”

“—I’m a peculiar person, you say?” A familiar voice rings out behind me, and I reluctantly turn around.

Maria Otonashi.

Upon seeing her face, my body immediately grows stiff—not because her accusatory words made me break out in a cold sweat, but simply because I was unprepared for the sight of her incredibly pretty face.

I have yet to get used to her unyielding personality and stunning looks. I can’t help getting flustered. I count up to three in my head as I always do when I prepare to talk to her.

I was together with Otonashi-san for the equivalent of an entire lifetime. I’m aware of that. But I don’t *feel* like I spent all that time with her anymore.

“Why are you so stiff? Do you think I’m angry? I wouldn’t get angry because of *that*, would I?”

“R-Right.”

While my bewilderment keeps me paralyzed, Asami-san wordlessly toddles toward Otonashi-san and positions herself behind her.

“…Mm? What is it, Asami?”

Asami-san doesn’t answer and just continues to stare at me. Haruaki opens his mouth instead.

“She’s acting a little bit strange today. Maybe she’s afraid that Hoshii is stealing you from her, Maria-chan! Because of that momentous *Boxed Lunch*.”

“……How dare you call her ‘Maria-chan’. You’re obliged to append a ‘-sama’…” Asami-san mumbles once more, almost without opening her mouth while her eyes remain cast downward.

“Anyway, let’s go, Kazuki.”

“Um, to the cafeteria?”

Otonashi-san utters an exaggerated sigh.

“Is it really so hard to guess my intentions after I informed you that I made you lunch? I want to avoid the school cafeteria, of course.”

Avoid the school cafeteria?

We meet there every day during lunch to discuss issues involving the *boxes* and O. That being said, it’s hard to get any new information and we hardly ever discuss anything that must be kept secret from others. In fact, nothing like that’s come up since Maria transferred here. Therefore, the school cafeteria has served us perfectly well.

But she wants to avoid the cafeteria today.

“So that’s why you made a boxed lunch… But couldn’t you just have bought a sandwich?” I mutter.

Otonashi-san suddenly brings her head near my face and whispers into my ear: “…I got fed up with the cafeteria sandwiches during the ‘Rejecting Classroom,’ if you know what I mean…”

Um… it’s perfectly understandable that she doesn’t want anyone to hear the term Rejecting Classroom, but if she draws so near my face right before Asami-san’s eyes, Asami-san might get the wrong idea, no?

I sneak a peek at Asami-san, and as I expected, her gaze seems even more pointed.

“Um, Maria-san. May I join you…?” Asami-san asks.

“Sorry, Asami. I want to be alone with Kazuki today.”

“Just the two of you…”

“Well, Kazuki, shall we get going?”

Otonashi-san grabs my arm and starts walking. Haruaki lets out an uncalled-for whistle.

…I wonder how Asami-san is taking this turn of events?

I turn around anxiously and hear her muttering something while gazing toward her feet.

“……If only a female cockroach with a swollen abdomen would enter your mouth, lay her eggs inside your stomach, those eggs would hatch, and your guts would get mangled…!”

She’s really creeping me out!

April 30th (Thursday) 12:43

“Being here almost makes me feel nostalgic,” I say once we’re behind the school building.

We spoke here quite a bit while trapped within the ‘Rejecting Classroom’.

However, Otonashi-san doesn’t seem inclined to indulge in reminiscence: after giving me a sharp glance, she quickly takes a boxed lunch wrapped in cloth out of her bag and hands it to me.

“…T-Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

I untie the cloth and open the lid. The contents look rather bland, which is a bit unexpected.

I start by popping one of the pieces of bacon-wrapped asparagus into my mouth.

….Mhm, the taste’s rather bland as well.

“Um… I really like this bacon-wrapped asparagus.”

“It’s from the supermarket.”

……..Aah, I see. Yeah, it’s no surprise that it tastes so bland.

Next, I take a bite of the hamburger steak. As with the asparagus, it looks and tastes completely generic.

“……Um, I really like this hamb—”

“That’s also from the supermarket.”

…I knew it!

I look over the rest of the boxed lunch. It seems like the potatoes, meatballs, dumplings and vegetables were all store-bought items.

“Don’t make a fuss—there’s no need to praise me so desperately.”

“…Otonashi-san, didn’t you cook at all while we were trapped inside the Rejecting Classroom?”

She previously told me that she practiced countless skills during those endless recurrences, such as martial arts.

“Oho? It looks like you’re keen to criticize my cooking, doesn’t it?”

“N-No, that’s not what I meant…”

“Oh please, don’t even try to deny it…Well, I’m not actually offended. I did learn to cook, and I was talented enough to prepare some fairly refined dishes, but I just never really got into it. I can’t take pleasure in honing my cooking skills.”

“So that’s why you skimped on my lunch…”

“Now we’re speaking plainly.”

Whoops.

I sneak a peek at Otonashi-san’s expression. …She doesn’t look offended…I think.

“…Um, on a related note, does that mean that you don’t care about the taste of food in general, either?”

“That’s incorrect. It’s a pleasure to eat something delicious.”

“So what’s your favorite food, if I may ask?”

“Strawberry tarts. Basically, any confection that contains strawberry—hey, why’d you freeze in the middle of chewing that meatball?”

“Ah, no—”

Such a cute favorite dish? I could see you liking something like sweet-potato paste, but I don’t think strawberries suit you at all. That’s what I was about say out loud, but I somehow barely held back. That was a close one.

“Hohoo, denying other people’s favorite foods—you’ve got some nerve, eh?”

“……You’re putting words in my mouth.”

“Sweet-potato paste would suit whom, you said?”

…why is it that I’m like an open book to you, Otonashi-san?

“So you like eating, but you don’t like cooking,” I summarize, deflecting her attention from my missteps.

“It’s not really enjoyable to cook for myself. The whole process feels like nothing but pointless labor.”

I see. Naturally, she had no one else to cook for inside the Rejecting Classroom. I’ve hardly ever cooked myself, but I know that one of the

pleasures of cooking is to watch others enjoy what you've prepared for them. So if there's no one else to cook for, perhaps cooking would just become fruitless.

"…But none of that matters right now. It's not like I called you out here just for some chit-chat."

"Y-Yeah."

"Let's get down to business," Otonashi-san says, after which she searches through her bag and takes out her cell phone. "I received an e-mail yesterday, late at night."

"An e-mail?" I ask in response.

Without a word, she holds out the cell phone.

"My deepest desire has been granted. Now we can be together forever."

Those were the words displayed on the screen.

Um… what's this? It reads like… an excerpt from the sappy messages of a couple who just fell in love? Huh? In other words, Otonashi-san is going out with someone? *The* Otonashi-san that I know?

I look at her. She is smiling wryly at my reaction.

"Oh well, this is hardly unexpected after seeing you earlier today. …Kazuki, take a look at who sent that message."

I do as told. The name in the 'From' field reads—

"Huh?"

—"Kazuki Hoshino"

I'm the sender of this e-mail? …No no no, that's impossible. I don't remember writing any such message. But the proof is right before my eyes…

"At first I thought it was a scam of some kind, but my spam filter makes that pretty unlikely. It's safe to assume that this e-mail was sent from your cell phone."

"But Otonashi-san, I don't remember sending this—"

"How about checking your Sent Mail folder then? Unless someone emptied it, the e-mail should still be in there."

I nod and take out my cell phone. Much to my dismay…

"My deepest desire has been granted. Now we can be together forever."

…I see the same message in my Sent Mail folder.

“T-That’s—” I sputter as I turn pale.

“Relax, Kazuki. I can tell from the look on your face that you didn’t send this message because you were feeling amorous. But if it really were sent by someone else, then he must have used your cell phone sometime after two in the morning to do so.”

The e-mail is dated April 30th, so that means it was sent at 2:23 A.M. this morning.

At that time, my cell phone was resting beside my pillow. I woke up because of Otonashi-san’s call, so that’s undoubtedly correct. Does that mean someone broke into my room late at night? Seriously? Why would someone go to such lengths…? “Kazuki,” Otonashi-san says while I’m lost in thought. ” Do you know how I was able to slip into the box we call the Rejecting Classroom?”

“…?”

I fail to see where she’s going with this.

“It’s related to what we’re talking about right now. I told you that I was able to enter the Rejecting Classroom because I’m a box myself, but that doesn’t really explain how I did it, does it?”

“…Now that you mention it…”

“In addition to slipping into boxes, I am able to detect and locate them as well.”

“…Yeah.”

“How would someone send an e-mail from your cell phone to mine sometime after two in the morning? Alternatively, how would someone make us believe that it happened? There must be multiple ways to do so, but I’m considering the following possibility.”

She continues.

“It’s the power of a box.”

—a box?

“Well… I don’t know how you can so easily come to such a conclusion. I mean, why would someone resort to a box just for—”

“Kazuki, weren’t you listening to me? I am able to detect boxes. …Ah, but you’re right: this e-mail might be totally unrelated. But there is one thing that I can say for sure.”

Otonashi-san fixes her determined gaze upon me.

“Someone is using a box nearby.”

It’s her serious look, and not her words, that gets through to me. I finally realize what’s about to begin.

It’s happening again.

Once again a box is about to destroy my everyday life.

“Okay Kazuki, let’s get back to that e-mail. Assuming that a box is involved, what might be the significance of that message? It’s a bit too optimistic to think that the *owner* just wanted to play a prank on us after acquiring special powers, isn’t it?”

“…What do you think?”

“It’s a declaration of war against us, or it might be a simple factual observation.”

“A factual observation…?”

What does she mean by that? Otonashi-san obviously hasn’t started dating the owner.

“It might be some kind of metaphor. Or the box was used to change the future this way… but we know one thing for sure.” Otonashi-san breathes out lightly and continues where she left off. “The owner is trying to interfere with us directly by using his box.”

Right, that’s what it boils down to. Otherwise, there would be no reason for the owner to send such an e-mail from my cell phone to Otonashi-san.

“…What should I do?”

“That a box was used is beyond doubt. I need to find out how this box is used and grasp its essence, and I want you to help me do that. You’re sensitive to slight changes to your everyday life, aren’t you? You might notice some abnormalities that I wouldn’t pick up on.”

“Okay, got it. I’ll keep my eyes open.”

“Great. I’ll be sure to get in touch with you once I’ve learned something new.”

Since the discussion seems to have come to an end, I turn back to my lunch. However, Otonashi-san’s chopsticks are frozen in place, so I also stop eating.

“Is there anything else, Otonashi-san?”

“Mmm… yeah, sort of,” Otonashi-san says in a strangely vague manner. “It’s no big deal, really, but it’s been bothering me, and I don’t like that, so let me be frank.”

“…Okay, go ahead.”

“What’s with the way you’ve been addressing me?”

“Eh?”

She posed an unexpected question.

“…If there’s no particular reason, never mind,” she says and returns to her meal.

Despite the urge to probe further, I decide to ignore it and continue eating as well.

April 30th (Thursday) 22:38

Slight changes to my everyday life… I try to come up with some while sitting at my writing desk, which I have been using since primary school, but nothing comes to mind. Changes. We're surrounded by all kinds of changes.

Unable to come up with anything, I open my cell phone on a whim.

A picture of Mogi-san in pajamas is displayed on the screen.

While she does look a bit skinnier than usual, she doesn't look pitiful at all. The photo was taken at the hospital, and there's a beaming smile on her face as she makes a peace sign.

"Kazu-chan's grinning! Looking at lewd pictures!"

I quickly flip my cell phone shut when I hear my sis' voice.

"I-I'm not!"

"You're all flustered~ Something's fishy here~"

My sister Luka Hoshino is three years older than I am. She climbs onto the upper bunk of our bed with a broad grin on her face… as always, she's only wearing underwear. Geez, Luu-chan… she never listens to me and keeps walking around in that outfit all the time even though she's almost twenty. Your brother's a teenager, Luu-chan, for crying out loud!

"Aah, let me guess: You were looking at a picture of Kasumi Mogi-san, weren't ya~?"

"Wha—!"

How did she…?!

"Uwa, bull's eye? Uhehe…"

"H-Hold on! Why do you know about Mogi-san anyway…? Ah! Don't tell me you played around with my cell phone without permission?!"

"'Course not~ I only saw her name once when she called you, 'kay? That was a wild guess~… ah, but aren't you quite the lech? Having fun while looking at a picture of a girl?"

This is exactly why I want my own room!

To hide my bashfulness, I tightly grip my cell phone and dive into the lower bunk.

“Hey, Kazu-chan, is that Kasumi Mogi-san your girlfriend?”

“N-No, she isn’t!”

“So what’s your relationship, then? Or more importantly: How do you feel about her?”

“……uh…”

Our relationship… I wonder? How do I feel about her?

Well, she did confess to me inside the Rejecting Classroom, and sending me this picture means that she feels something for me… probably.

I certainly don’t find her feelings toward me disagreeable.

But honestly speaking… I don’t know if there’s anything more to that. All the feelings I used to possess while inside the Rejecting Classroom are gone now. I have certain memories that imply that it’s likely that I had similar feelings for Mogi-san. But because of those memories, I find it hard to think about her objectively. I have no idea how much I can trust my feelings any more.

“Well… we’re friends, that’s for sure!”

My sister doesn’t reply even though I’ve racked my brain to answer her question. But when I perk up my ears in bemusement, I hear her breathing in a calm and steady rhythm.

…The speed with which she can fall asleep never ceases to amaze me.

That’s when I notice that I haven’t yet replied to the e-mail I was looking at, so I begin to type a reply.

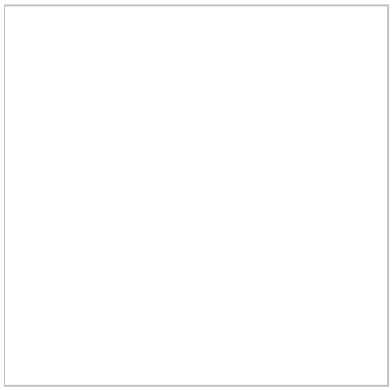
I look at the time displayed in the corner of the screen.

22:59

I’m in the midst of typing my response when my stream of consciousness suddenly goes blank.

April 30th (Thursday) 23:18

Well then, time to make a call.



May 1st

May 1st (Friday) 08:14

Kokone ignored my casual “Good morning” today.

She’s acting strangely distant. She’s still talking to our other classmates even though she would normally pop in arbitrarily into my conversations. At the same time, she’s sneaking peeks at me from time to time, while glaring at me with a pretty scary look on top of that.

I don’t know what’s going on—I have no idea why she would suddenly start acting like this. Since I don’t really feel like talking to my other friends when Kokone’s behaving so oddly, I try to remain on the sidelines by focusing instead on munching on a cheese-flavored Umaibō.

“Did you do anything to Kiri?”

As expected of Daiya. He completely ignores my subtle signals and asks me point-blank.

“…I have no idea what’s wrong.”

“I see… Okay, let me tell you something good.”

“Something good?”

Does he know the reason for Kokone’s strange attitude?

“You know, when Kiri had her first midterm in middle school, she was so eager to get good marks that she almost ended up pulling an all-nighter on the eve of the exam. Because of that, she fell asleep during the third exam. It wouldn’t have been that remarkable if she had just slept silently, but that didn’t happen: Her babbling filled that dead-silent classroom even while she was sound asleep. If I remember correctly, she was saying something along the lines of ‘This plug suit is too tight, I’ll never fit in…’”

“Daiya… What on earth are you talking about?”

“Mm? About her weak point, of course. It takes a lot for her to dislike someone, so now’s your chance to get on her bad side and banish her from your life. If you remind her of that story now, it’ll be a walk in the park!”

“Uhm, why would I want to do that..? Besides, isn’t that story pretty cute, actually?”

“No, this is where it stops being cute and starts getting funny. Listen up as I regale you with the Legend of Kokone and her Drool!”

Since I’ve got a bad feeling about Daiya’s yarn, I wordlessly cover my ears, but Daiya just grabs my arms.

“Stop, I’ve had enough!”

“No man, forget that story for now—look over there!”

I look in the direction Daiya is pointing. Otonashi-san and a male student are engaged in a conversation by the door. They both look very serious.

The student she is talking to is Ryuu Miyazaki, a classmate of mine who happens to be the class president. His black-framed glasses are perched above his intellectual-looking, almond-shaped eyes. Unlike Daiya, who was elected to the presidency in his first year solely because of his superior grades, Miyazaki-kun fulfills his duties with great responsibility. But while he may be a model student, he isn’t painfully rigid, and that’s why he’s still popular.

I reluctantly approach them; to be honest, I happen to have some trouble dealing with Miyazaki-kun’s self-confident attitude.

“…What’s wrong?” I ask. They turn around to face me.

“Oh, Kazuki. This guy stopped me when I wanted to enter the classroom.”

“Of course! What’s wrong with you, moseying into a classroom of your seniors? Heck, it’s not even lunchtime!”

Now that he mentions it, Otonashi-san doesn’t usually come here except during our lunch breaks. Maybe it’s because she at least pays lip service to the school rules, rather than ignoring them outright.

“Planning to carry Hoshino off somewhere again, right?”

“What I do with Kazuki is none of your business.”

“But it is. I’m the class president here, whether you like it or not. That means that I have to keep an eye on my classmates, got it? The first period is about to start; if you take him away now, he won’t make it back in time.”

“I couldn’t care less. We have something much more important to take care of.”

For a second there, I don’t know what she’s referring to, but on second thought, there’s only one thing that comes to mind.

—It has to be about the *box*.

That’s a task of great importance for me too.

“Um… I’m sorry, Miyazaki-kun, but I’ll go with her,” I say, causing him to stare closely at me with a frown on his face. I reflexively step back, intimidated by his piercing gaze.

“So you do whatever she tells you to?”

“T-That’s not what I’m saying.”

“You sure are a wimp, aren’t you? Ever thought about having your own thoughts instead of playing a girl’s poodle?”

“Hey, watch your mouth. It’s like you’re saying Kazuki doesn’t have any will of his own,” Otonashi-san interrupts.

Miyazaki-kun grins in response. “Ah, please forgive me. Did you take offense because I insulted your sweetheart? Ah, or did it bother you because I implied that you’re ordering Hoshino around?”

“Miyazaki—” Otonashi-san scowls coldly at him.

He chuckles, “What? If you want to object—”

“You’re acting suspicious.”

Otonashi-san’s words silence Miyazaki-kun.

“Your position as class president is too weak a pretext for meddling in our affairs. You didn’t seem to care a bit until now, right? Why did you change your mind all of a sudden? What are you trying to achieve by approaching us so frantically? Is this an attempt to find an excuse that would allow you to meddle in our affairs?”

“…What the fuck are you talking about?”

“Fine then. Your behavior just caught my eye because I’m very sensitive to my environment at the moment. One can never be too careful, and even if you are really up to something, then this speech should put you on notice.”

I watched their verbal sparring in mute amazement. Why is she talking like that all of a sudden?

“Kazuki, let’s go,” Otonashi-san says as she grabs my hand.

“Ah, yeah…”

Miyazaki-kun gazes at my arm with a slightly strained face as I am dragged away. Indeed, his approach was a bit more aggressive than normal.

As I am pulled out of the classroom, we come across Haruaki and Asami-san. Haruaki is returning from the restroom and Asami-san starts chasing after Otonashi-san.

“Oh, what’s up Hoshii? On the run?”

“…On the run…”

Upon hearing Haruaki’s unnecessary remark, Asami-san’s gaze fixes upon our joined hands. She then raises her gaze slightly and looks at me with narrowed eyes. …I’m scared.

“Oh, what’s wrong Rikochii? You’re acting strange today.”

She keeps staring at me without appearing to be annoyed by that nickname, which she usually would.

“A-Asami-san has been acting a bit odd since yesterday… right, Haruaki?”

“Mm? Really?”

Haruaki, how air-headed do you have to be to forget about what happened one day ago?

“…Maria-san.”

“Sorry, but we’re in a hurry,” Otonashi-san says to Asami-san while glancing at her quickly, and turns around.

Shocked by Otonashi-san’s attitude, Asami-san casts down her eyes and murmurs…

“……if only the underground board of the school would get spammed with libelous comments and humiliating pictures that thoroughly ruin Kazuki Hoshino’s dignity…”

Don’t take it out on me!

May 1st (Friday) 08:31

Just like yesterday, our meeting takes place behind the school building.

“You know what this is about, right?” she asks while leaning against the wall.

I gulp as I nod. I suppose she has collected new information about the box that’s currently in play.

“There are several things I’ll have to ask you.”

“Okay.”

“Why do you think we are often together? Like right now, for example.”

“Why? Because it benefits you. It increases the chance that you come across O again.”

“…Exactly.”

I’m pretty sure that was a perfectly good answer, but Otonashi-san wrinkles her brow.

“Hang on: So you *are* aware of the position you are in and haven’t gotten the wrong idea, is that correct?”

“…? What are you talking about?”

“Come on! …No, never mind. Of course you wouldn’t say *such a thing* if you hadn’t thought it through; I owe you a sincere answer. I mustn’t run away. Kazuki, my answer to your feelings is—”

“Hold on!” I quickly interrupt her, causing her to yell out.

“Why do you interrupt me?!”

“S-Sorry… but what on earth are you getting at? Aren’t we talking about the box?”

“About the box…? What’s with that? Of course, the box is important, but isn’t it obvious that I’ve brought you here because of the call you made yesterday?”

“My call?”

“Yes, yesterday’s—” she breaks off in mid-sentence, her eyes wide-open, and

holds her breath. “…I see. That e-mail… No, no way… I’ve spent so much time together with Kazuki, phone or not, this can’t be…”

“Otonashi-san…?”

“Kazuki, I’m going to check something now,” she says in a loud and clear voice. Then, she begins to mumble. “You… confessed to me over the phone yesterday, right?”

Confessed?

Does she mean *confess* as in *please go out with me*?

“You also told me that you would confess again face to face the next day—in other words, today.”

“I…I wouldn’t—”

“Right, you wouldn’t say that, now that I think about it…”

“Of course I wouldn’t! W-What makes you think that I said something like that…?”

“Well, take a look at your cell phone,” she calmly suggests.

I nod, take out my phone, and check my call history.

The name I find at the top of the list is:

“Maria Otonashi”

The call was supposedly made on May 1st, at 1:49am.

That’s impossible. I was asleep at that time, so I naturally can’t remember calling her.

“Yesterday—no, strictly speaking, today—at two o’clock in the morning, you rudely roused me from slumber by calling and confessing to me. That is my understanding of what happened.”

There’s no way I’d do that. But on the other hand, Otonashi-san wouldn’t make up something like this just to tease me.

However, as a matter of fact, I didn’t call her.

“Did someone play a prank on you? I have no idea how they’d pull it off…”

“A prank…huh? So you’re suggesting that someone used *your* cell phone and confessed to me because that person was clowning around?”

As unreasonable as it sounds, that’s the only thing I can think of. But the moment before I nod:

“With the exact same voice as you?”

“—Huh?” I utter, leaving my mouth open like an idiot.

“Unless you have a twin brother from whom you were separated at birth, let me assure you of one thing, Kazuki: There was no doubt that it was your voice.”

“You, you must have been hearing things! You just saw my number and thought it was me… probably…”

“Kazuki. I have spent a human lifetime together with you. I would never confuse your voice with someone else’s.”

She looks at me with utter conviction. I can’t believe that she confused me with someone else, either.

Which means that I’m the only one under suspicion? No, that’s just as absurd. Otonashi-san is convinced that it was my voice, but I’m convinced that I didn’t confess to her. But it’s a fact that I called her.

“That doesn’t add up…”

“Yeah, it’s contradictory, however you look at it. Which means that—”

Right.

A contradiction like this couldn’t occur normally. Which means that—

“We are dealing with—a box.”

I unwittingly press my fist against my chest, which already throbs with fear even though I’m still at a loss as to what’s going on.

“We have to hurry up and come up with a countermeasure. The *owner* is obviously targeting us, and with ill will as well.”

“What can I do…?”

“Let me think… I need some time to sort things out. For the time being, just make sure you’re ready. I’ll determine how we’re going to proceed.”

I nod wordlessly.

“We’re done here then. I’m returning to my classroom.”

With these words, she turns around and walks away.

May 1st (Friday) 09:32

I returned to class after the end of first period, only to find Kokone standing beside the door in a daunting pose. She is scowling at me for some reason, her face slightly red. Maybe she's angry?

"……I've been waiting…"

"Huh?"

"I've been waiting for you to approach me!" she complains in a loud voice. "But you thought you could just ditch first period together with *her*! I mean, what the heck! I don't get it! Your actions don't make sense, Kazu-kun!"

From my perspective, Kokone getting so worked up doesn't make sense, but I should be quiet now.

Seemingly irritated by my silence, she gives my chest a shove and presses me against the wall, grumbling all the while.

"Um… I'm sorry."

"Why are you apologizing?!"

"Huh? …S-Sorry."

"No, seriously, why are you apologizing?!"

Kokone draws closer and closer as I try to cope with my hopeless confusion.

"Or do you *want* to apologize?! Apologize and pretend it never happened?! Isn't that cruel?! W-Well… that would make my life a lot easier, though…"

"W-Wait… what are you talking about?"

We're talking past each other, just like Otonashi-san and I did earlier.

…Eh? Wait a sec. Does that mean that—

"What don't you understand, mm? Because…! Y-You know… because…"

Her face flushes even more—she turns crimson right up to her ears.

If my guess is right, then I don't want to hear about it. Nevertheless, Kokone whispers the answer into my ear after she confirms there are no eavesdroppers.

“I’m talking about—that call yesterday when you confessed to me.”

What…? I confessed to her?

I’m at a loss for words. Kokone looks at me with upturned eyes.

“Um, you know… I…”

She bashfully looks down at the floor, probably misinterpreting my silence. She mulls over what to say for a while, but eventually begins to speak.

“I’m sorry… I… I really don’t know how I should respond… I mean… I thought of you as a buddy, and was pretty sure that’s how you felt, too… Besides… not that it matters… but there’s Daiya…” She musters her courage by clenching her fist and raises her head. “…Give me some time. I don’t know when I can give you an answer, but give me some time… Sorry.”

Her sorrow appears so clearly on her face that my heart starts to hurt. I want to shout out and tell her that it wasn’t me, but there’s no point in telling her that. Only a fool would act so thoughtlessly.

Reading a different meaning into my painful expression, Kokone straightens her lips just like I have, turns around, and trots back into the classroom.

After I can no longer see her, I murmur, “I also think of you as a friend!”

I clench my fist.

Suddenly, a certain thought occurs to me. I take out my phone and examine my call history. …Why didn’t I notice earlier? May 1st, 1:29am.

Kokone Kirino is listed right below *Maria Otonashi*.

May 1st (Friday) 11:00

Well then, let’s see how things turned out.

May 1st (Friday) 12:00

The first thing I hear is the sound of a girl crying.

Daiya's face is right in front of me. I haven't the slightest idea of what's going on.

What the hell?

Cold hostility is flickering in his eyes. Toward whom? Toward me, of course, because I am the one reflected in his eyes. In other words, he is regarding me as an enemy.

Suddenly, a wave of pain rolls through me. My mouth and my cheeks hurt, as do my wrists.

Daiya is sitting astride me, grasping me tightly by the wrists.

I finally manage to comprehend the situation I'm in.

I'm in the music room. It's third period, so I should be in history class right now, but for some reason I'm in the music room, which is where my fourth period class is held. There is blood sticking to my uniform. Whose blood? … It's probably my own; there's a metallic taste in my mouth. Daiya must have hit me.

What happened… what on earth happened here?!

"Daiya… what's—"

"Keep your mouth shut, Kazu. One more word and I swear I'll crush your mouth."

Daiya's hostility is real. The plain tone of his voice proves that he's not joking; he would probably resort to violence if I make an unasked-for remark.

What sort of nightmare is this?

However, if this were a nightmare, my body wouldn't hurt so much.

This is reality.

The crying hasn't stopped yet… who's crying, anyway?

I turn my head toward the source of the sounds.

Kokone Kirino is crying.

The first sensation I feel is comprehension. *I see, that's why she didn't stop Daiya before things got to this point.* The second sensation is wonder. *Why would Kokone be crying?*

The next sensation that spreads within me is horror.

—Please, no.

OK: Kokone is crying and Daiya has completely freaked out. So, who made her cry? Who made him angry? I'm in the music room, so it must be fourth period already. I don't remember anything that happened during third period. Yet I'm here. In a different place than I was before. In other words—

—I moved unknowingly?

Like when I unknowingly sent an e-mail to Otonashi-san and confessed to her.

Like when I unknowingly confessed to Kokone and destroyed our relationship.

What if I unknowingly did something that hurt Kokone and provoked Daiya's wrath?

"That's enough, Daiyan," Haruaki says as he puts his hand on Daiya's shoulder.

"That's enough"?

Does that mean I deserved to get knocked down and beaten up?

Daiya bangs my hands against the ground and releases them. He slowly gets to his feet, piercing glance still fixed upon me. Then, almost as if on a whim —

"Ugh!"

—He tramples on my stomach with all his strength and turns his back to me.

I squirm in pain and catch a glimpse of my surroundings as I do so. Everyone —my classmates, the music teacher, and even Haruaki—is looking at me as if I had done something incomprehensible. Kokone's crying gets even louder as she presses her face against Daiya's chest.

I try to rise, but I have trouble doing so because of the pain. Nobody bothers to give me a hand.

It's as if I were prostrating myself before them.

Why do I have to endure this? Why does everyone seem to think that I got

what I deserved? I don’t know what happened, but I do know the cause.

—It’s a box.

Right, it’s not my fault, it’s the fault of a box. I haven’t done anything wrong!

Then why do I have to go through this?!

I stand up. On my own.

Even though I’m the center of attention, no one approaches me.

I know perfectly well that no one is going to understand what really happened. Therefore, no one approaches me, no one speaks to me. No one. Not Daiya, not Kokone, and not even Haruaki. No one. No one. No one no one no one—

“Kazuki, are you alright?”

No one but her.

I smile. Her sudden appearance in the middle of the lesson leaves everyone astounded, but I’m not surprised at all.

“…Maria.”

As she hears her real name escape my lips, her eyes widen for a moment, but she immediately regains her usual equanimity and rushes from the door to my side.

She stops in front of me and draws so near to my face that I can make out her individual eyelashes, completely ignoring the spell that is keeping everyone else away. She gently strokes my swollen cheek.

“First of all, let’s get your wounds treated. Follow me to the infirmary.”

“…Got it.”

She walks away and I follow her.

No one calls out to us.

The moment I leave the room, the crying grows even louder. At least, that’s what I thought.

May 1st (Friday) 12:17

No one is in the infirmary.

Upon realizing this, Otonashi-san examines my injuries and palpates my wound. She takes a medicine box off a shelf and starts to treat my wound with deft movements.

“I sure didn’t expect to come across such a disastrous scene when I decided to share my new thoughts on this box with you… What happened?” she asks, while disinfecting my wound.

“I would like to know that myself, actually.”

“You don’t remember?”

I nod. For some reason she lets out a horribly annoyed sigh.

“It’s always the same thing with you ever since the Rejecting Classroom. It’s getting old, you know?”

“It’s not like I want to lose my memories…”

“I’m just joking, of course,” she explains as she applies a gauze patch to my face. “The first thing I saw was Oomine treading on you. Do you remember what happened before that?”

“…He was already on top of me by the time I regained consciousness.”

“So you don’t have the slightest idea why he hit you?”

“Mm, I don’t know.”

After hearing me out, she crosses her arms and ponders the matter.

“Kazuki, do you have your cell phone with you right now?”

“My cell phone? It should be inside my pants pocket…”

“There might be some sort of record left behind. Search it thoroughly.”

I quickly take out my cell and search it as instructed.

Calls Received, Outgoing Calls, Inbox, Outbox; none of them seems to have changed. I open the data folder.

“Voice Folder”

I have a Voice Folder? I open it.

There is one item with a 12-digit filename. I guess the numbers reference the file creation time. If it wasn’t edited in some way, this file was created on May 1st, around 2 a.m.—in other words, sometime late last night.

I open the file and press the phone to my ear.

A voice starts to play.

“Good morning Kazuki Hoshino-kun. Or should I say, good day, or good night even?”

What the…?

I unwittingly pause the file playback. Why is there a recording of some unfamiliar guy on my phone? Why is this guy talking to me?

“What’s wrong Kazuki? Did you come upon anything useful?”

Unable to answer her, my fingers tremble as I press the play button once more.

“Well, I guess it doesn’t matter—you don’t care about such details either, do you? What you do care about is who I am, right? Ah, just to confirm, you know about the boxes, right? You heard about them from O, right? There’s no need for me to repeat that explanation, is there?”

He knows about the boxes as well as O? Does that mean that he is the owner?

“You must have noticed by now that your everyday life is starting to crumble. Cool, isn’t it? After all, that’s what I’m aiming for. But why? <u>Because I want to eliminate you, Kazuki Hoshino</u>.”

The contrast between the casual tone of his voice and what he’s saying causes my heart to race.

“I will eliminate you. I will destroy everything you value. With my box, I can steal everything from you. It’ll be a cinch! After all—”

The voice is cut off. No, that’s not quite right; I just dropped my cell phone.

“Kazuki…?! Are you alright? What on earth did you listen to?”

“Ah—”

I’ve just experienced clear hostility—from someone who has obtained the worst and most powerful weapon, a box, and is going to attempt to destroy

my life.

Otonashi-san picks up my phone and opens the voice file.

“This is—!”

She raises an eyebrow as she listens closely to the message.

After a while she flips the cell phone shut, returns it to me without a word, crosses her arms and loses herself in thought.

“Kazuki,” she finally says in an alarmingly clear voice. “I’ve been ruminating over this matter ever since the events of this morning. I had come up with some vague ideas for how we should proceed, but I couldn’t come to a conclusion. However, now that I’ve heard this recording, I’ve made up my mind.”

Otonashi-san looks straight at me.

“I won’t trust you anymore.”

“—huh?”

I open my mouth like an idiot, unable to follow her.

“You’ve noticed by now that this box seems to be focused directly on you, haven’t you? To make matters worse, you’ve already fallen into the hands of the owner. Therefore, I cannot trust you.”

I repeat those words in my head.

She can’t trust me—?

“W-Why? I would never betray you!”

“Right, you wouldn’t. If you are Kazuki Hoshino, that is.”

“Huh?”

“But are you really Kazuki Hoshino? Maybe you’re the owner?”

“Y-You’re being cryptic, Otonashi-san. The owner is the one who recorded that voice message, no?”

“…Did you not finish listening to the recording? No… even if you stopped listening midway, you should have at least recognized the speaker’s voice.”

“Otonashi-san, did you uncover his identity? Do we already know who the owner is? You know him?”

“…Well, I suppose it stands to reason that you fail to recognize the voice.

After all, you've never heard that voice in this manner, and the way he talks is entirely different as well," she murmurs instead of answering my questions. She then turns her back to me and proceeds to leave the infirmary.

"W-Wait! Come on, at least tell me whose voice it is!"

She stops. But she does not turn around to face me.

"Kazuki, try listening to this voice once more when you've regained your composure."

Upon saying so, she walks away.

Stunned by her absolute rejection, I'm unable to call out to her.

Otonashi-san left me here alone.

As I listen to the voice, which is unfamiliar to me even though I hear it all the time, once more, I finally understand what's going on.

"Hahaha…"

I can't help laughing. Fair enough. It's only natural that she can't trust me right now.

"Shit…"

Then… Then, what am I supposed to do now…?!

"It'll be a cinch! After all—"

I finally hear the end of the message.

"—We're sharing your body."

It's the voice of none other than myself.

May 1st (Friday) 13:00

I guess I’ll keep quiet for now.

May 1st (Friday) 14:00

All of a sudden, my consciousness is cut off, only to be restored moments later.

I’m sitting in my seat. We should still be on lunch break, yet I’m suddenly here in the classroom.

I check the time: It’s 2 p.m., so fifth period is about to end.

I hurriedly look around the classroom. Kokone and Daiya’s seats are empty—perhaps they left early—while my other classmates are more or less concentrating on class. Looks like everything’s okay for now. On my desk, I find my textbook, my notebook and my writing implements. It seems that I haven’t taken any notes.

There’s no doubt about it anymore.

There are two entities dwelling within my body. It’s not just “me” anymore; there’s “another self” whom I cannot perceive, and has been controlling my body until just now.

The bell rings.

The break begins, but because of what happened in the music room, nobody approaches me. Instead, people only cast curious glances at me from afar.

This state of affairs must have been deliberately brought forth by my “other self.” After all, he said that he wants to erase “me”—this is one of his attacks.

I fall flat on my desk.

What should I do about my “other self,” now that even Otonashi-san has abandoned me?

“Hoshii.”

Someone’s calling my name, so I raise my head in response.

The expression on his face is totally unlike his usual joyful self. With an unbefittingly serious face, Haruaki asks me, “Look, why did you do that to Kokone?”

I keep my mouth shut. I can’t possibly answer him—after all, I don’t even

know what, precisely, he's referring to.

"You know… I don't think you would say something like that without a reason, Hoshii, so I'm sure there is one. I'm probably just too dense to get it. But unless you explain, I'll remain in the dark! So why don't you let me in on what's going on?" Visibly uneasy, he continues. "Otherwise, I can't support you, honestly speaking."

His words make one thing clear to me:

Haruaki is the last fortress that protects my everyday life.

Would he believe me if I told him that I was being controlled by "another self"? …He just might. But—

"—I can't tell you. I can't tell you right now."

I still haven't really come to terms with the situation I'm in myself, so I wouldn't be able to come up with an explanation satisfying enough to convince him.

"But I will soon!" I say while looking straight in his eyes, trying to convey my sincerity.

"Okay, I got it. I'll wait," he responds plainly, and walks away silently. He must have really wanted to voice his discontent, but held back somehow.

Haruaki said he'd wait, so I can't talk to him until the proper time arrives. I'm going to lose him if I speak carelessly.

And once I lose Haruaki, my final fortress, I won't be able to retain my everyday life.

…Yeah, I gathered what I have to do now. I have to learn more about this box and my "other self" as quickly as possible.

But how? I don't even have any means of communicating with him.

"……Ah."

Right. How did I learn of his existence, anyway? Because he left me a message.

I walk into the corridor outside my classroom and take out my cell phone—I'm going to send a message to my "other self," using the voice recorder.

Of course it's unclear whether or not he'll answer, but it's still worth a try.

"Hey, how do you do? Or do we know each other already, my 'other self'?" I start the recording. "I now understand that we're sharing my body, but I'm still confused. I want you to tell me more about this box. And I want you to

reveal who you are.”

Will he answer me if I question him so bluntly? After all, he’s someone who is trying to eliminate me.

Therefore, I try provoking him a bit.

“Oh, but I don’t care whether you reply or not. My behavior won’t change no matter what you say to me. I couldn’t care less even if you have the strongest possible reason to loathe me, a goal that’s the noblest imaginable, or a past that deserves everyone’s pity.”

I’m surprised by the hostility of the words that naturally well up, so in contrast to my own character. But I feel that I’m saying what has to be said.

“I will *not* approve of your existence.”

I have to convey my determination.

How could I approve of this? No way in hell could I allow anyone to steal me from myself.

My legs are trembling and I’m leaning against a wall before I know it. That’s probably because my body is deeply disturbed by the first instance of distinct hostility I’ve felt toward someone in my entire life.

I close my cell phone and take a deep breath.

I’m going to crush my “other self.”

No matter what his situation is, I will not permit his continued existence.

May 1st (Friday) 15:34

I notice that Kazuki Hoshino has recorded a voice file.

May 1st (Friday) 16:00

Right before my eyes is the face of an unfamiliar girl. Out of surprise, I let go of the strap I've been holding and fall over. The people around me giggle as I get back on my feet, trying to ignore them. I analyze the situation.

A strap? So I'm riding a train?

The reason is obvious: My body has been controlled by my "other self" again.

Without missing a beat, I take out my cell phone and discover a new voice file.

I press Play.

"I see, this is a pretty handy way to communicate. I was just starting to think that a one-way conversation would get boring! Well, let me answer your questions," the intruder says in my own voice. *"When I received this box, I decided to make a certain wish: to become you—Kazuki Hoshino!"*

I hold my breath.

"Well, and here I am, controlling your body… but look, don't you think that my wish is somehow lacking, since my control is only temporary and I can only steal some of your time? Rest assured, this will change before long. The process of taking over will end exactly one week after I first used my box. Once May 6th rolls around—the last day of the Golden Week—your soul will leave your body, while mine will remain."

So I have just over four days to destroy his box.

"That should be enough to give you an idea of the situation you're in. Well then, you asked who I am, didn't you? Haha, that's a difficult question indeed. Who am I? To be honest, I don't really know myself! I mean, I'm Kazuki Hoshino, no? But that's not the answer you want to hear, is it? To simplify matters, I've come up with an alias to differentiate us. You may call me"

He says in my voice.

"—Yuuhei Ishihara."

I burn that unfamiliar name into my memory.

"Okay, I guess I'll conclude with some feedback. You said that you wouldn't

approve of my existence; well, I'm sorry, but I broke out into laughter after hearing that! I mean, what can you do about me? Prattle into your cell phone? Care to explain how you intend to execute your plans?" Yuuhei Ishihara laughs hideously using my voice. *"You're really pitiful, so let me offer you one way to get rid of me. More than half of Kazuki Hoshino is already mine. It's simple—*"

He speaks.

"—just commit suicide."

Again, his unbearable laughter resounds from my phone. I desperately fight against the urge to press the stop-button before listening to the rest of his message.

The voice calms down and I hear his final words.

"Oh, one more thing, in case you haven't noticed: one of your friends sent you an e-mail!"

A friend…?

I gulp and open my inbox. The name *Haruaki Usui* is displayed at the top.

I don't remember opening it, but the message is already marked as read.

What—

What has he done to Haruaki—?!

I take a deep breath. Still unable to calm down, I bite my lips. I don't want to admit it, but my hands are trembling.

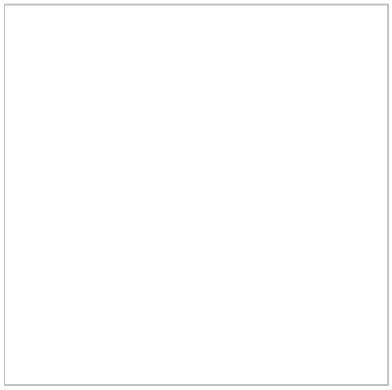
I open the e-mail.

"Please don't talk to me for a while."

Aah—

The last fortress that protected my everyday life just crumbled away.

May 1st (Friday) 23:22



I’m dreaming.

It’s the same dream that I’ve experienced several times already.

May 2nd

5月3日(日)
憲法記念日
5月2日(土)

May 2nd (Saturday) 00:11

I wake to a rumbling coming from the desk.

I get out of bed and pick up the cell phone that's the source of the noise. I look at its LCD screen.

"Maria Otonashi"

Maria Otonashi? Given the current state of affairs, why would she want to call me? Hasn't *Kazuki Hoshino* let her in on what's going on? …Well, I guess he realized that even his lover wouldn't buy such an absurd story. That being said, she should still be able to notice that something's off without his saying a word… oh well.

Cutting short my train of thought, I take the call.

How could I resist the desire to talk with the girl I admire?

"Hello."

"Kazuki. Come to my room."

Wow. Does she always treat Kazuki Hoshino this way?

Okay, how should I react?

Let's summarize:

My box will allow me to completely take over "Kazuki Hoshino" within a week. In order for me to do that, it would be best if I make as few waves as possible, which means that I should stay away from Maria Otonashi.

But I mustn't get confused: that's not my ultimate goal.

What I really want to do is torment Kazuki Hoshino so much that he scratches his neck raw in utter agony, make him succumb so thoroughly that he *begs* me to take his body as he prostrates himself before me, and make him an empty shell who exists solely to surrender his body to me by May 5th. *That* is my desire.

Why would I possess such a desire? Because doing so allows me to feel that I've become Kazuki Hoshino.

As long as I lack that feeling of truly being Kazuki Hoshino, I'm just a

freeloader in someone else's body—which would be completely pointless.

That must also be why I have to share this body with "Kazuki Hoshino" for a while—because otherwise, I wouldn't feel like I've truly assumed his identity. Heh, this box is pretty well-made.

"Hey, how about replying?"

Yeah, there's no reason to waver.

Maria Otonashi is without a doubt very important to him. Losing her will be a terrible blow.

Therefore, "Yuuhei Ishihara" will steal Maria Otonashi from "Kazuki Hoshino."

This is an absolute condition for fulfilling my absolute desire.

"Ah, I'm sorry. I was absorbed in thought," I say as I recall how "Kazuki Hoshino" normally speaks. "Um, your room? Sure, if you come pick me up."

Her phrasing suggests that Kazuki Hoshino visits her room on a daily basis.

"Why should I pamper you? Just take your bike."

"My bicycle is in bad shape right now, you see," I reply, trying to deceive her with a random lie I came up with on the spot. I don't know where she lives, so I'll be in trouble if she doesn't come fetch me.

"Geez, the guy tells the girl to come pick him up? Isn't it normally the other way around? …well, whatever. I'll take my motorcycle, is that okay?"

"Do you mean… a moped?"

"No…? It's a full-fledged 250cc motorcycle."

Damn! There's no way Kazuki Hoshino wouldn't know about her motorcycle.

"Aah, I see; I didn't mention that I bought one.

"Ah, y-yeah."

That was close! …No, there's no need to get nervous—she wouldn't see through me because of something that minor. Getting nervous is unavoidable to a certain degree, though, since I'm dealing with Maria Otonashi.

"Speaking of which, I'm actually not old enough to get a license, am I?"

She's unlicensed?! I guess I made the right decision by not pretending to know about it…

"Well then, I'll be at your place in 15 minutes. Wait for me outside."

She ends the call before I can respond.

“…Kazu-chan, who was that? I’m pretty sure I overheard a girl there, no? And why didn’t you take the call on the veranda?” says a girl in her underwear—probably Kazuki Hoshino’s sister.

I see. Kazuki Hoshino doesn’t take his phone calls indoors in the presence of his sister. I guess I’ll keep that in mind.

“Can’t be Kasumi Mogi-san at this hour, either…”

Kasumi Mogi? Who’s that?

May 2nd (Saturday) 00:31

Exactly 15 minutes later, Maria Otonashi arrives on a massive motorcycle.

“Here,” she says as she throws me a helmet.

I catch it, but don’t know what to do next. However, because she keeps staring at me, I decide to just put it on.

“What are you waiting for? Hurry up and climb on.”

I sit behind her as instructed, and hesitantly wrap my arms around her slender waist. Maria Otonashi, the girl I adore, remains silent.

In less than 10 minutes, she stops in front of a five story apartment complex. Though it is a pity, I obediently let go of her waist, get off the motorbike and briefly take a look at the building as I remove the helmet. It’s a brick building that looks fairly high class and even features a fancy electronic entry system. The rent here must be quite high.

I doubt that she would bring her boyfriend to her apartment at so late an hour if she lives with her family, so I bet she lives by herself. And right now, she’s taking her boyfriend to her room. Which must mean… well, the situation is self-explanatory. Obviously.

My heart throbs with excitement. She doesn’t seem to care, however, and proceeds toward her room, taking the elevator and then walking straight up to a door that reads *403*.

The first thing I notice upon entering the room is a light fragrance of peppermint. It’s a ten tatami-mat sized studio apartment. It looks larger than it is because it’s so sparsely furnished.

“What’s so interesting about my room? It hasn’t changed since you last came here, has it?”

“…Yeah,” I reply, trying to appear calm, and sit down on a cushion.

After giving me a short side-glance, Maria Otonashi opens a closet and seems to be searching for something.

“All right, Kazuki, hold out your hands.”

Hold out my hands…? Does she plan to kiss them or something?

“Get with the program already. Like this,” she says as she holds out her own hands. I follow suit.

Click.

What was that? Even as I begin to wonder, I feel a tight pressure around my right wrist. I take a look.

Handcuffs.

“…Is this supposed to be a joke, Otonashi-san?”

“A joke? Surely you’re the one who’s joking. We do this stuff all the time, don’t we?”

All the time…? Handcuffing me?

“Oh? You want to pretend to resist tonight? Wow… you are beyond help.”

“O-Ouch!”

With a bewitching smile and a few skillful moves, Maria Otonashi forces my hands behind my back and snaps the handcuffs around my left wrist as well. Next, she applies foot cuffs to my feet and puts me down on the ground. I try to move my body. I’d probably be able to stand up, but beyond that my movements are tightly restricted.

“Today, let’s also use this,” she proposes as she takes out a piece of black cloth, which she then wraps round my eyes, cutting off my field of vision.

What a situation. My body is almost completely restrained, I’m blindfolded, and I’m rolling on the floor like a caterpillar—almost as if I were a soldier captured by the enemy.

…Hm? Aah, I see.

“Seems like the preparations are complete. Let’s begin.”

Maria Otonashi should have noticed that something is going on with Kazuki Hoshino, so there’s no way she would be comfortable getting intimate with him.

If that’s true—whom is her current treatment directed at?

“Well—” she continues “—you aren’t Kazuki Hoshino, so who are you?”

I see.

Everything up till now was just a ploy intended to incapacitate “me.”

“Hehe…”

Brilliant. As expected from Maria Otonashi, and that’s why I admire her so

much. I'm really glad that my fears of getting disillusioned turned out to be unfounded.

"Why are you laughing? I don't think you understand the gravity of your situation."

I'll try one last protest just for the heck of it.

"No, no… Otonashi-san, you're being absurd!"

"Stop acting. It's futile."

Aah, so it was useless after all—but that just makes me laugh even more.

"You're a strange guy. Why are you so joyful, even though I just thoroughly deceived and captured you?"

"Maria Otonashi, may I ask why you think that I am not Kazuki Hoshino?" I ask point-blank, stopping with the acting.

"I listened to your voice recording while being aware of the box."

Her blunt statement allows me to understand—not just how she saw through me, but also that she is a unique being.

"Okay, you know about my box and you listened to my message, cool, but that's not gonna help you figure out whether you're dealing with 'me' or 'Kazuki Hoshino,' is it? Since when did you know it's 'me'?"

"Since you said 'Hello' on the phone."

"…You're joking, right?"

Given our identical voices, it should be impossible to distinguish between us.

"Kazuki answers the phone with a 'Yes?'. He doesn't use 'Hello'. Of course, I wouldn't normally have taken heed of such a small change, but since I know that he is involved with this box, I naturally became suspicious. The only thing left for me to do was confirm my suspicions, so I spoke with care until you slipped up. I'll tell you something good: Kazuki has never been in this room."

"That is indeed a good thing." Because it would be unforgivable for someone as pathetic as Kazuki Hoshino to frequent the room of a noble lady like Maria Otonashi. "In other words, you deceived me to confirm if I really existed."

"Such a trifle barely requires confirmation. In fact, I wanted to confirm whether or not you share Kazuki's memories. Heh, it seems like you don't."

"……"

So she was already a move ahead in terms of confirmation.

I admit that this is an important point. If Yuuhei Ishihara and Kazuki Hoshino shared their memories, then there would be no secrets if she tried to work out a plan with Kazuki Hoshino. She wouldn't be able to cooperate with Kazuki Hoshino.

"Let me get straight to the point: who are you?"

"Can't you tell? I'm Kazuki Hoshino!"

"Stop messing around and answer the question."

Still lying on the ground, I shrug my shoulders.

"I'm not messing around with you: I'm Kazuki Hoshino. That's the identity my box entitled me with."

"…What do you mean?"

"Just what I said. My wish was to become Kazuki Hoshino, and a box grants any wish, doesn't it? Therefore, I am Kazuki Hoshino. I can't call myself anything else."

My words temporarily silence Maria Otonashi.

"…to become Kazuki Hoshino, you say? That's crazy… Why Kazuki of all people? I don't think Kazuki Hoshino's body is particularly desirable…"

"Because you're by his side," I immediately answer.

"—I?"

"Yeah, I've always admired you. The girl of my dreams would be by my side; that was reason enough for me to want to become him."

Maria Otonashi lets out a sigh.

"…I never would have guessed that I am the primary reason for all of this," she complains, but regains her composure right away. "I understand that you insist on being Kazuki Hoshino. However, I can't call you that."

"Then just call me 'Yuuhei Ishihara.'"

"'Yuuhei Ishihara'? Never heard that before. That's not your real name, is it?"

"Who knows?"

"Hmph, whatever. But you'll tell me one thing: how do you switch with Kazuki?"

"What's the point of asking about that?"

"I don't need to answer your questions."

"Well then, I don't need to answer yours either."

“You’re pretty bold for a guy who’s bound hand and foot, aren’t you?”

“I’m not going to fall for that! You can’t do anything to me—hurt me and you’ll effectively be damaging Kazuki Hoshino’s body.”

“Forms of torture that have no lasting impact on the body are a dime a dozen, but well… I couldn’t use violence anyway…” Maria Otonashi says in a whisper.

“What?”

“No, never mind… anyway, you don’t plan to tell me, do you?”

“Hm, to be honest, it wouldn’t make a difference, but I’m not telling you.”

“It wouldn’t make a difference?”

“Heh, of course not. No matter what you try, ‘Kazuki Hoshino’ is going to disappear on May 6th unless you directly deal with my box. In light of that, what difference would such a trivial bit of information make? I mean, you can bet I’m not going to tell you how to defeat the box! Or do you want to try killing me? Go ahead, but that’ll also send Kazuki Hoshino to kingdom come!” I say as I laugh in an exaggerated fashion.

How’s that, Maria Otonashi? You never imagined your situation was that hopeless, did you?

“Fufu…”

But for some reason, she lets loose a silent laugh.

“…Why are you laughing? Are you so desperate that you can’t help but laugh?”

“Desperate? You think this is a desperate situation? Fufu… this level of menace is like a mosquito compared to what we fought against last time. The problem I’m facing right now is that you won’t tell me how you switch with Kazuki, right? How is **that** desperate?”

“I told you that you can only solve this matter if you kill Kazuki Hoshino—did I lose you?”

“That’s why I was laughing. Because—<u>that’s a lie</u>.”

I’m left tongue-tied.

“I know that you want to distract me, but I’m afraid I can’t be deceived by such a lousy lie.”

“…Why do you think it’s a lie?”

“You said it yourself—you’re Kazuki Hoshino. But Kazuki Hoshino doesn’t

possess the box, hence, he can’t be the owner.”

“What’s with that wordplay? You can’t escape from reality!”

“You still don’t get it? Okay then, listen up and try answering this question.”

Maria Otonashi says firmly:

“Do you really believe that it’s possible for a soul to dwell in someone else’s body?”

“W—”

Well—

“You can’t respond right away, hm?”

Aah… damn.

I don’t know why, but…I have a feeling that by hesitating I committed a fatal error.

“‘Boxes’ grant wishes completely, but a person who thinks more or less rationally wouldn’t be able to believe that such a wish could come true. And as I suspected, you don’t believe in your wish from the bottom of your heart, either, judging from your reaction to my question. The box incorporates the doubts of the owner when it grants a wish—therefore, the owner was not able to take over Kazuki Hoshino.”

“……”

“Which means that the owner continued to exist as before after failing to take over Kazuki’s body—separately from you.”

Ignoring my silence, she asks me: “So what are you, when you’re not the owner?”

I can’t answer.

“If you don’t know, let me tell you: you are an artificial being generated by the distortion of that wish. You’re just a fake copy of the owner. Yes—merely a ‘fabrication,’ so to speak.” She smirks briefly before she continues. “And since you’re just a ‘fabrication,’ I have no real interest in you.”

I see. So that’s why—I don’t possess the box.

“Hahaha!”

But so what?

The reason I put this wish into the box in the first place was that I wanted to dispose of a bastard like myself anyway. I'm not the owner? I'm a fabrication? That's great!

It's precisely because I am nobody that I can without doubt become Kazuki Hoshino.

"…why are you laughing, Yuuhei Ishihara?"

"Hehe, it doesn't matter! However, there's something I want to ask: so I am a fabrication—I'll admit that—but who are you to be able to perceive that?"

"Who I am, you ask…?"

For some reason Maria Otonashi is at a loss for words.

"……you are a fabrication. And I am—"

"What are you brooding about? I'm just asking because I want to know why you're so knowledgeable about the box."

"…Ah, oh, that's all?" Once she understands my intent, her voice rapidly regains its usual firm tone. "I'm a box myself. And since I'm a box, it stands to reason that I'd be well versed in the characteristics of boxes."

"…You're a box? Is that some kind of metaphor?"

"Interpret it as you please."

A box, huh? If she's telling the truth, then that would really make for a perfect match.

"By the way, there was something I had to tell you, wasn't there?"

"…what are you talking about?"

"Oh? Yesterday night, didn't I promise that I'd tell you directly today? Since the date has finally changed, I'll say it now!"

The smile on my face is so broad, it sucks that I can only show her half of it because of the blindfold.

"I love you, Maria Otonashi."

She called herself a box.

I think that makes us a perfect match, really I do—as an object to conquer, and as an enemy.

May 2nd (Saturday) 07:06

I wake up in an unfamiliar room in handcuffs.

“……err…”

My head feels all muzzy since I just woke up. I’m in a white room and I smell something pleasant. A shower is running somewhere nearby. My back hurts, and I see a futon. I’m also in foot cuffs.

Wait.

What is this?

My wooziness is instantly swept away. I hurriedly try to stand up, only to fall over just as quickly.

While supporting my smarting nose with both arms, I sit up and take another look around. I see a large bed, a table, a laptop and speakers on the table, and an intimidating-looking book. Overall, the room seems sparsely furnished. The sailor suit hooked over the closet doorframe suggests that I’m probably in a girl’s room.

Did Yuuhei Ishihara get me into this situation? Yeah, of course it was him.

I hear someone turn off the shower. After a while, a hair drier starts blowing. I assume the occupant of this room is in the dressing cubby.

Which means that a girl is…? There’s a naked girl on the other side of this wall? What’s with this situation… And what on earth have I, no, what has “Yuuhei Ishihara” done to that girl?!

The sound of the hair drier stops and the dressing cubby door opens.

“U-Uwa!!” I utter as I hurriedly avert my eyes, seeing that she’s wearing nothing but a white shirt.

“Ah, you woke up?”

My brain freezes the moment I recognize that all-too-familiar voice.

“Eh?” A familiar face awaits me when I instinctively look up. “Ah, Otonashi-san…?”

“Who else looks like me?”

In response, I look over her entire body. Yeah, it's unmistakably Maria Otonashi.

Then I suddenly realize that I'm staring at her, and she's only wearing a thin shirt over her underwear. Again, I hurriedly avert my eyes.

"S-Since you know that I'm here, please be a bit more careful!"

"What's the cause for panic? This is hardly anything to fret about, right?"

…that just sounds wrong coming from a girl's mouth. It's like something that Haruaki would say when he teases Kokone.

However, before I have a chance to say anything, she preempts me with a shocking comment.

"First of all, didn't you see far more of me just yesterday? A skimpy outfit like this should hardly faze you anymore!"

"……Eh?"

"I never imagined you would do *that* as soon you entered my room, especially after you seemed so well-behaved at first. Geez, you really gave me quite a shock."

"What, what are you talking about…?"

But I can't deny the facts—everything about the situation I'm in suggests that she's telling the truth. After all, I'm in her room, she just took a shower, and is walking around scantily clad—

"Y-You're joking, right?" I ask anxiously.

"Yeah, it's a joke," Otonashi-san bluntly answers.

"Huh?"

"…Uh-huh, I see. So you're Kazuki Hoshino. Your idiotic reaction when your mouth gapes wide open is quite hard to imitate, after all."

What's this feeling of vexation that's rising up inside me, even though she turned out to be joking—just as I had wished…?

"……Otonashi-san. The fact that I'm here without knowing how I got here, means that you talked with Yuuhei Ishihar, ri—huh?"

As I spoke while lying clumsily on the ground, Otonashi-san had moved nearer. She was so close that I could smell a pleasant scent radiating from her long hair… probably shampoo or some conditioning treatment or something.

"W-What?"

A clicking sound makes me realize that Otonashi-san is removing my foot cuffs. …well, that's nice, but couldn't she have at least given me some warning?

After removing the foot cuffs, Otonashi-san kneels in front of me.

"Umm…"

I follow her example and also get on my knees.

She slowly opens her mouth.

"Kazuki, who am I?"

What is she saying out of the blue?

She's Maria Otonashi, obviously, but why is she asking a question like that right now?

"Think back to the Rejecting Classroom."

"Hm? …Ah!"

Now that she mentions it, I remember a similar scenario when she had me write her name.

At the time, Otonashi-san asked people to identify her by name, in order to have someone write 'Maria'—a name that could only be known to someone who retained their memory across those repetitions.

So why is she bringing that up?

To confirm my identity. Otonashi-san is asking in order to distinguish "me" from "Yuuhei Ishihara," because she'll be able to confirm that I'm "me" if I say her secret name.

"—Aya Otonashi."

Therefore I spit out that name. The name she once used in the Rejecting Classroom, which only "I" can remember.

But the very act of seeking confirmation means that she doesn't know who I am right now? I have to go this far to make her recognize that I'm "me"?

That's somehow—very mortifying.

"Aya Otonashi, huh?" she murmurs in disappointment.

"…was I wrong?"

"No, you're right. I just didn't expect that you would be able to come up with the answer so quickly. That's all."

"Okay… I guess? But now you understand that it's 'me'?"

“For the time being, yeah. As you may have noticed, I’m up to date on the current situation and have already listened to the voice file that Yuuhei Ishihara recorded.”

“Okay.”

“I have also spoken with Yuuhei Ishihara.”

“…What was he like? Did you learn anything?”

“Hm, I can’t say for sure,” Otonashi-san answers.

“Ah, but wasn’t he vicious? After all, you even had to use foot cuffs.”

“Of course I considered that possibility and used them for that reason. No… it’s more accurate to say that I applied them because of you, Kazuki.”

“…huh?”

“How did you react when you realized that you were restrained? What actions did you take?”

“Well, I was confused… and even took a tumble.”

“I was aiming for that reaction.”

“……Feeling like bullying me?”

“No. I thought I could observe the moment when ‘Yuuhei Ishihara’ switches back to ‘Kazuki Hoshino’ by waiting for that agitated reaction. Though in the end, I missed the opportunity because I was taking a shower. It’s a real pity that I missed your funny reaction.”

I see, so she did feel like bullying me.

“Okay then, that’s it for now. Kazuki, we’re leaving.”

“…huh?”

For some reason, Otonashi-san looks at me and rolls her eyes.

“We’re taking you home, of course. Hey, what time do you think it is?”

“Hm?”

I look around and see a clock. It’s 7:15AM.

“Or do you want be late? It’s time to go to school.”

“Hah…”

Our school only lets us off every other Saturday, so we still have to go to school this Saturday morning.

“What’s with this ‘Hah?’ Do you plan to go to school empty-handed?”

…She has a point. We have to go to my place.

“……Um, can I go home on my own?”

“What are you talking about? How could you go back on your own when you don’t even know how to get there from here? Regardless, you’d never make it in time on foot. I’ll give you a ride on my motorcycle.”

“G-Got it.”

I’m in trouble…

I mean, even though it wasn’t my fault, I slept over without getting permission from my parents. When I come home in the early morning, how will that look? I check my cell phone, and sure enough, there are several calls from my mom in the call log. This is bad. If on top of that I bring a girl home with me—

“Otonashi-san… could you please hide when we reach my home…?”

“Why?”

Otonashi-san gives me a bewildered look. Naturally, my intentions aren’t getting across…

Looks like I’ll have to slip into my house and get ready without getting caught by my mom.

May 2nd (Saturday) 07:34

My attempt to return on the sly ended in absolute failure.

“That was a failure,” Otonashi-san murmurs as we walk toward the station. We left the motorcycle near my house.

“……indeed,” I concur with a sigh.

My mom caught me right at the foot of the stairs.

Of course, a sermon followed.

I can’t blame her, though: she had every right to get angry at me since I stayed out overnight without permission. I can’t blame her, but—

As I meekly listened to the lecture, Otonashi-san naturally became tired of waiting outside.

Unsurprisingly, mom concluded that the sudden appearance of Otonashi-san was the reason for my delinquency, and began to stare at her. To my surprise, Otonashi-san reacted with a soft smile and said the following:

“It’s not like Kazuki was out enjoying the nightlife or partying. He was together with me the entire time until the morning. I didn’t bring any other people to my room. We were completely alone, so please be at ease.”

…that’s just pouring oil on the fire in such a situation, isn’t it?

My mom—still far from letting go of her children—froze so completely she almost seemed pitiful. Otonashi-san totally misunderstood the situation and continued with a frown, “…? As I said, Kazuki didn’t go out anywhere and just slept in my room. That’s totally acceptable, right? Aah, but I did have to get a bit rough, so my apologies.”

Mom silently glanced at my wrist. The reddened marks left by the handcuffs still remained.

She collapsed at that point.

As Otonashi-san lept forward to hold her up, she finally understood with an “Aah!”.

“I see. We are a boy and a girl in our teens, huh?”

“How can I face her from now on…?”

As I remember that scene, I sigh deeply.

“What are you talking about?”

“Huh? Didn’t you say ‘that was a failure’ just now?”

“Yeah, I was talking about the motorcycle.”

“The bike?”

Yeah, she’s on a totally different page.

“I gave you a ride on the motorcycle, right? If I count Yuuhei Ishihara, that’s technically two rides. That’s what I’m referring to.”

“Huh…? Why?”

“Try imagining what might have happened if ‘Kazuki Hoshino’ and ‘Yuuhei Ishihara’ switched places while riding. I wouldn’t be surprised if you let go of my waist and fell, similar to how you were surprised by the handcuffs.”

“Ah…”

So that’s why she left the motorcycle in front of my home.

“By my standards, that’s quite a careless failure… I’ll be more careful from now on.”

“Yeah. …By the way, Otonashi-san. Could you tell me now what happened while you were with Yuuhei Ishihara?”

As soon as I ask—

“____”

Otonashi-san stops.

And looks at me.

Expressionlessly.

“Eh…?”

Why such a face?

She opens her mouth, still expressionless.

“I cannot tell you what happened.”

“W-Wh—”

“Why? Didn’t I tell you that already?” she explains and spits out her next few

words with a cold look. “I won’t trust you anymore.”

She did tell me. I indeed remember those words. There’s no way I’d forget. But—

“Isn’t that no longer the case…?”

After all, there’s no mystery anymore. Otonashi-san now understands the reason for my previously inexplicable behavior.

“Don’t make assumptions. You still don’t get it, do you? First off, Yuuhei Ishihara could have been lying. Maybe he does in fact have full access to your memories as ‘Kazuki Hoshino,’ and can use both of those personalities for his benefit.”

“T-That’s ridiculous!”

“Indeed, I might be overthinking things. But there’s still no proof to the contrary.”

“But—”

“Let’s assume that Yuuhei Ishihara was completely honest about the characteristics of the box. Even so—”

Otonashi-san suddenly claps her hands, causing me to instinctively shut my eyes.

“Now assume that an identity swap occurred in that instant. I have no means to rule this out. So I would be talking to you as ‘Kazuki Hoshino,’ not realizing that you actually switched to being ‘Yuuhei Ishihara.’ We don’t know when you switch identities, so I might inadvertently disclose an important plan to Yuuhei Ishihara. That’s why it’s dangerous for me to tell you everything—it’s basically analogous to the situation with the motorcycle.”

Indeed, that’s right. …But I am *Kazuki Hoshino*.

“Here’s another example—you consider yourself ‘Kazuki Hoshino,’ right?”

“Of course I do!”

“But what if you were just someone who’s convinced that he’s Kazuki Hoshino?”

“That’s im—”

“That’s impossible” is what I was about to say, but then I stay silent.

What is there that proves I’m really “Kazuki Hoshino”? My appearance? My personality? My memory? But then what makes Yuuhei Ishihara “Yuuhei

Ishihara”? After all, he also exists in the same body.

No, that’s wrong.

I am *Kazuki Hoshino*. I’m not mistaken. I will absolutely not doubt this.

“That was just an example. Don’t dwell too much on it. But Kazuki, you understand why I can’t trust you, right? I have yet to comprehend this box—the Sevennight in Mud. Until then, I can’t trust the personalities that dwell within you.”

So when will she fully grasp this Sevennight in Mud and start trusting me again? Not while Yuuhei Ishihara dwells within me, right?

She doesn’t trust me.

Even though Otonashi-san is supposedly my ally, my ally doesn’t trust me.

The train station comes into view.

I halt.

“Why are you just standing there? There’s not much time left before the train arrives.”

“…why should I go to school?”

Being with Otonashi-san made me completely forget about that problem. Normally, I would of course go to school; no, even if I were involved in affairs that stood between me and my everyday life, I would still go just to express my defiance. As things currently stand, however, the more time I spend at school, the more I’m going to erode my by-this-point practically nonexistent place there.

“To collect information about Yuuhei Ishihara. There’s no doubt that he is closely related to us. In the first place, only our school’s students have contact with both you and me. The importance of collecting information from our school should be obvious.”

“But there’s no need for me to be present, is there…?”

“Your presence greatly modifies the prevailing conditions. Today is the last day of school before the long holiday. We mustn’t let this opportunity escape,” she says.

She said that in order to obtain the box, she doesn’t care if my everyday life gets destroyed.

I misunderstood her. I had considered her an unconditional ally.

But that’s not correct. I mean, Otonashi-san isn’t working to help save me, but

in order to find O and obtain a box.

So what am I to her? Most likely—

—just bait for O.

“…Kazuki, I understand that going to school must be depressing. But you realize that this is the optimal course of action, don’t you? Refraining from action while aware of your options isn’t like you,” Otonashi-san says to me reprovingly.

Surely she’s just pursuing her own goals.

Otonashi-san doesn’t trust me.

However, since I’m not able to see Yuuhei Ishihara, or to directly oppose him, I need to depend on a supporter. And she’s the only person who comes to mind.

To trust a supporter in this situation is effectively entrusting her with my life. I have no other choice but to blindly believe in her. If Otonashi-san wanted to ruin me, she could entrap me without difficulty.

“…what should I do at school?”

But still, she’s the only supporter I have.

“Let’s see, for example—”

She proposes various possibilities, all of which I agree to. As anticipated, she easily comes up with a number of effective plans, but her very facility is what I’m worried about if she… were to betray me.

“Do you also have something in mind?”

One thing occurs to me:

“How about changing what we call each other?”

“…What do you mean?”

“Instead of ‘Otonashi-san’, I’m going to call you ‘Aya’ from now on. Yuuhei Ishihara doesn’t know that name, so he definitely won’t call you that. Therefore, calling you ‘Aya’ proves that I’m ‘me.’ How does that sound?”

Otonashi-san remains quiet.

“Is this plan a nonstarter?”

“No… I think it’s quite effective. Let’s try it,” she agrees, though still slightly displeased for some reason.

But still… ‘Aya Otonashi’, huh?

‘Aya Otonashi’ was the name of an illusion that doesn’t exist within our everyday life.

Furthermore—it was once the name of my enemy.

Those were the thoughts that flashed through my mind at once.

May 2nd (Saturday) 08:11

I realize that the atmosphere turned frigid as soon as Otonashi-san and I entered the classroom.

Of course no one greets me.

Daiya's behavior I expect, but Haruaki doesn't say hi either. Kokone's seat is still empty. Maybe she's going to be absent today. …Because of me? —Of course.

I guess even Otonashi-san did not expect me to be in such an awful position. She darts a sad glance at me. But then she pulls herself together, focuses on my classmates and claps her hands twice.

"Listen everyone!"

Our classmates' gazes focus on her immediately, probably because they were already paying attention to us.

"Does anyone know someone named 'Yuuhei Ishihara'?"

Upon hearing this, several students exchange suspicious looks.

Otonashi-san said that the probability is high that the owner would be one of my classmates. Since it wouldn't make sense to pursue control of an unknown person's body so far as to use a box for that purpose, I suppose she's probably right.

But isn't the owner the "Yuuhei Ishihara" dwelling within me? Or does she mean that another entity exists separately from him?

I don't really get it.

However, for the time being, I agree that just asking the class about the name 'Yuuhei Ishihara' is reasonably effective.

"Hey, you, what are you up to?" Miyazaki-kun addresses us while casting an awfully disdainful glance at me.

"You again? What? Do you know Yuuhei Ishihara?"

Miyazaki-kun sneers at us and replies with something unrelated to Otonashi-san's question. "You've got some nerve to still be together like this after *what*

you've done."

What is he talking about?

I look at my other classmates. Anger dwells within their eyes. Their anger is probably the result of some form of righteous indignation.

In other words, they cannot forgive me for being together with Otonashi-san?.

"What's your excuse, Hoshino?"

I'm stuck since I don't know why they have a problem with us being together, and I can't ask about *what* Yuuhei Ishihara has done.

My only choice is to remain silent.

Miyazaki-kun reacts to my silence with a plastic sigh.

"Whatever. I won't broach this subject again! …That's my view, anyway." Miyazaki-kun starts saying scornfully, "My mom's lover… ah, need some context? Yuuhei Ishihara is my mom's lover.."

He suddenly spit it out.

"…Miyazaki. Will you tell us more about Yuuhei Ishihara?"

"Whoa, whoa… surely you realize how hard it is for me to speak about him, right?"

"We have our reasons. Isn't my bringing up the name 'Yuuhei Ishihara' reason enough to tell me more?"

Miyazaki-kun frowns, but agrees ever so reluctantly with an "…okay, fine."

Because the subject is so delicate, he urges us to move to the corridor to continue the discussion.

"Well, it's not like I'm hiding anything—" With these words, Miyazaki-kun begins his tale.

His parents divorced during his first year of middle school because their feelings for each other had changed; both of them found new lovers and chose to live with them instead. His mother's new partner was Yuuhei Ishihara.

Miyazaki-kun's mother and father didn't want to bring him into their new households since he represented their old lives. They didn't rub it in, but it was impossible to hide, and Miyazaki-kun sensed their feelings.

He didn't know why his parents chose to split up and reject him, but as their son, the circumstances didn't matter: He had undoubtedly been betrayed in an almost unforgivable way.

Eventually, after some argument, his father took custody of him. But it was impossible for him to build a new household with his father and his father's new lover as well. After he refused to live with them, he began to live alone in an apartment during the second year of middle school, receiving only living expenses from his father.

During middle school, he considered himself to be the unluckiest person on earth; he was part of an unhappy family situation that might appear in cheap dramas, but is so seldom found in reality.

Therefore, he naturally bore a grudge against his parents, who were responsible for this situation, against his father's new lover, and against Yuuhei Ishihara.

"They should all just die if you ask me," Miyazaki-kun curses at them in an emotionless voice.

"I understand your feelings, but you shouldn't say such things."

"Why, thank you very much for your wisdom," Miyazaki replies with a sardonic laugh. "Have I said enough yet?"

"…Yes. Thank you for speaking with us about this delicate matter," Otonashi-san says.

"Heh, that's not like you."

"I was just thinking that you sure have your troubles, too."

"Thanks for the sympathy."

The bell rings.

"Okay, I'm returning to my seat. Oh, one more thing Hoshino—" As he enters the classroom, Miyazaki-kun looks at me for the first time since we started discussing Yuuhei Ishihara. "Don't get me wrong. Just because I answered Otonashi's questions doesn't mean that I accept what you've done. You've gone too far."

With these words, he walks to his seat.

The rest of the class favors him with smiles of approval for the vitriol he directed at me.

Most likely, he deliberately waited to say his piece so that everyone else heard him.

……That's just cruel.

I lie on my desk and cover my head with my arms.

“Kazuki, I’ll return to my own classroom. You haven’t forgotten what I told you on the way here, right? Give it a go.”

I reluctantly raise my head, take my cell phone and send Otonashi-san a blank e-mail.

Otonashi-san checks for the e-mail and nods. I then erase it from my sent mail folder.

“Don’t forget to send these e-mails during class!”

Send me an e-mail every 10 minutes—that was Otonashi-san’s instruction.

This way, she’s able to probe the process by which “I” and “Yuuhei Ishihara” switch back and forth.

After all, Yuuhei Ishihara isn’t aware of what we’re doing and won’t send any blank e-mails.

Well, since we don’t fully understand the Sevennight in Mud yet, this is hardly a reliable method.

“Still need anything?”

“Nope, Aya.”

For just a second, Otonashi-san looks astonished, but she doesn’t say anything and leaves the classroom.

I sigh.

…Yuuhei Ishihara is Miyazaki-kun’s mother’s lover? This is the person controlling my body? Somehow it doesn’t make sense that a random adult would have any interest in taking over my identity.

Suddenly, my cell phone vibrates inside my pocket. I immediately take it out and open it. A new e-mail has arrived. I open my inbox.

The name ‘Maria Otonashi’ is displayed.

Hm, perhaps she forget to mention something? Or was there something she couldn’t say out loud?

The e-mail contains a single phrase. It’s a very simple phrase, probably written with the possibility that Yuuhei Ishihara might be in control in mind.

Be on guard.

Ah, I see.

Why has Miyazaki-kun been interfering with us since yesterday? One reason immediately comes to mind:

—Because Miyazaki-kun is an ally of “Yuuhei Ishihara”.

His forceful approach may have been intended to keep “Yuuhei Ishihara” informed of our actions.

I mustn’t take what Miyazaki-kun says at face value, since he might have ulterior motives. That must be what Otonashi-san was trying to convey with this e-mail.

However, while it’s probably true that Yuuhei Ishihara is a completely different person than the “Yuuhei Ishihara” controlling me, I can’t bring myself to discard everything Miyazaki-kun told us as nothing but lies. The feelings he demonstrated while speaking about his family situation seemed genuine.

I return my gaze to my cell phone and reread her simple e-mail.

Be distrustful.

…Ah, maybe she meant something else entirely. Maybe she didn’t mean “be on guard” when it comes to Ryuu Miyazaki.

Instead, I must regard everything and everyone that way.

I can only discover what “Yuuhei Ishihara” has done while controlling my body by hearing about it from others. But I have no one else as an ally. Not Miyazaki-kun, Haruaki, Kokone, or Daiya, and not even Aya Otonashi is on my side.

I erase the e-mail. I’m supposed to immediately delete any e-mail from Otonashi-san.

I clench my fist.

“—Why.”

Why don’t I have a single ally when even Yuuhei Ishihara has one?

May 2nd (Saturday) 09:05

I'm surprised to find "Kazuki Hoshino" in class. I was sure he'd still be handcuffed in Maria Otonashi's room. It honestly astonishes me that he came to school despite the terrible situation he's in.

Did Maria Otonashi force him to? In order to gather more information? If so, she sure has no heart.

Not that I care. The outcome won't change either way.

Kazuki Hoshino's everyday life is going to be destroyed regardless.

After all, I arranged things so that Kazuki Hoshino's everyday life will be destroyed just by his being with Maria Otonashi.

Why did I confess to Kokone Kirino? Naturally, to destroy his everyday life.

However, there's a proper reason why I chose this specific method. How could I forgive him for hanging around with a girl like that when he's blessed with a lover like Maria Otonashi?

Therefore, I chose to put an end to that relationship by making a confession.

My method had immediately borne fruit. On top of that, the repercussions were tremendous. The confession to Kirino was far more explosive than I had expected.

I got Oomine to beat me up. In fact, the comment that brought this situation to a head was not even intended to offend her.

I merely said:

"Hey, when do I get to hear your reply?"

I simply tried to sound out the situation between us, but Kirino got shocked for some reason and broke out in tears, and Oomine overreacted and hit me.

Why did that happen? I didn't understand at the time, but in retrospect, it's obvious. "Kazuki Hoshino" and "Yuuhei Ishihara" don't share any memories, so I don't know if Kirino had already given "Kazuki Hoshino" her reply to his confession when I asked her that question. However, how would she respond to those words if she had? I can't say for sure, but I bet they would hurt her feelings.

However, I still don’t know why Oomine reacted so strongly. I have heard rumors about his having special feelings for Kirino. While I haven’t been able to confirm them through personal observation, they just might be true.

I didn’t directly witness what I’m about to describe, but I realized this subsequently after talking to Haruaki Usui.

It seems that when I was attacked by Oomine, most of the members of class 2-3 were assuming that the quarrel started because Kazuki confessed to Kirino.

The fly in the ointment was that Maria Otonashi then showed up.

Kazuki followed her outside without hesitation, as if he were clinging to her. He completely ignored Kokone Kirino’s feelings—those of the crying girl he had apparently confessed to.

And even after this incident, Kazuki Hoshino kept accompanying Maria Otonashi as if nothing had happened.

It’s only natural that his classmates were enraged when he deserted the oh-so-popular Kokone Kirino. However, since Hoshino had no other choice but to rely on Maria Otonashi, he couldn’t act independently.

Kazuki Hoshino is gradually losing his everyday life.

Not through my direct actions, but due to his own behavior.

Heck, this is just too great.

I inform the teacher that I need to visit the restroom and walk out into the corridor—where Maria Otonashi is already lying in wait. She speaks while frowning: “Why are you smiling?”

I suppose I started grinning without realizing it?

“Probably because you were waiting for me, Otonashi-san.”

“Hmph, trying to act like Kazuki Hoshino, *Yuuhei Ishihara*?”

She could detect that I’m Yuuhei Ishihara that easily?

No, what’s really amazing is that she rushed to class 2-3 right after our identities shifted; probably because she realized that “Kazuki Hoshino” had switched to “me.”

I assume they made some kind of arrangement to alert her to the switch.

“Follow me,” she says.

“Where are we going?”

She smiles faintly in response to my question.

“What’s with that question? Didn’t you announce your destination yourself already?”

“Huh?”

“You’re going to the restroom, aren’t you?”

May 2nd (Saturday) 09:14

“Are you really OK with this? Won’t we both get into trouble when people find out that you’re in here with Kazuki Hoshino?”

I’ve been led into a stall in the girls’ restroom.

“…Heh,” Maria Otonashi sneers, seeing how naturally I entered the stall.

What’s going on in her head? It’s true that the third floor restrooms in building two are hardly ever used because only special classrooms are found here—even less so while classes are being held like now—but I don’t get why she went out of her way to bring me here.

“I guess so. We’d get suspended from school and singled out by our classmates.”

“Throwing your hands up already? Shall we make some fuss, then?”

“Why don’t you try?” she says unimpressedly and sneers at me.

…Looks like she saw right through my bluff.

I’m the one who’s going to end up in Kazuki Hoshino’s shoes in the near future. I have already damaged his environment more than originally planned. I can’t allow myself to aggravate his position further.

“Okay Yuuhei Ishihara, open Kazuki’s cell phone.”

“…What’s this all of a sudden?”

“Open the image file that’s third from the top in the data folder.”

I feel the urge to resist, but since picking a fight over this would be pointless, I do as she told me. I open the image file; it’s a picture of a lovely girl in pajamas, probably self-shot.

“Tell me, who is this?” she asks.

“…Why are you asking me that?”

“I won’t tell you since it would destroy the point.”

What a frank answer.

I look at it again. It’s a girl I don’t know, but telling her that would probably

be to my disadvantage.

I shift my attention to the background. It's definitely a hospital room. Come to think of it, there was a major accident nearby about two months ago. Could she be the victim? In that case, her name would be… I don't remember.

…Oh well, I'll just try a shot in the dark.

"It's Khazumi Moghy." I try saying the name the underwear-only girl, Luka Hoshino, mentioned previously.

"Too bad. You're wrong."

It didn't work, huh? I smile bitterly.

"Okay, I didn't know her name, but so what?"

"That was a lie."

"Huh?"

"Saying you were wrong was a lie. It is indeed Kasumi Mogi, although it seems you have never seen her in person," Maria Otonashi says, utterly poker faced.

"……that was dirty of you, no?"

"How so? You are naïve to think that you could get away with a guess, correct or not. Anyway, here's another question for you: How are Kazuki Hoshino and Kasumi Mogi related?"

I have no clue what she's trying to accomplish with all these questions. Well, I guess she's deliberately concealing her intent from me.

I grope for an open-ended answer.

"……they're friends."

"And?"

So Maria Otonashi won't let me get away with such a vague answer, after all.

"What can I say when I don't even know who Kasumi Mogi is?"

This is an obvious and natural answer, since I already told her that I don't know that girl. This answer should be perfectly safe.

"<u>You don't know who Kasumi Mogi is?</u>"

Even so, Maria Otonashi makes it sound like a fatal mistake.

"…Didn't I say so from the start? I've never seen the girl in this photo."

"Yeah, you've never seen her, that's what you said. <u>But how is 'never seen'</u>

equivalent to ‘do not know’?”

“…You’re not making any sense! I have never seen her, so there’s no way I’d kno—”

—Wait, that’s not true.

“I see. I now have a fairly decent grasp of your true identity. You are not a member of class 2-3.”

…..…that was what she’s been shooting for.

That girl, Kasumi Mogi, probably hasn’t come to school because she’s been hospitalized, which explains why I haven’t seen her. The students of class 2-3, however, know about her even though they may not have actually met her: Because she’s their classmate and the mysterious individual whose seat is always empty.

Right, the intention of those questions was—to narrow down the pool of suspects.

“Hmph, to be honest, it seemed likely that Ryuu Miyazaki was the owner. Looks like I was wrong, though. You’re not a member of class 2-3, after all.”

Ryuu Miyazaki?

Why is she bringing him up?

Don’t tell me that he acted on his own because I was unable to give him instructions today while captured by Otonashi-san?

“You… no, to be accurate, the owner, has to be someone who’s not our classmate but knows us well. I don’t think there are many people who know that much about us. He is a person Kazuki and I can easily recognize, right?”

Of course, I don’t reply.

“There’s one more possible clue I have found, which is about Yuuhei Ishihara. Ryuu Miyazaki called Yuuhei Ishihara his mother’s lover. I was trying to understand why he mentioned that, and I came to the following logical conclusion:”

Maria Otonashi declares with conviction.

“—Yuuhei Ishihara does not exist.”

I hold my breath.

“You didn’t care about what name to use. But either you or Ryuu Miyazaki decided to use it to your advantage; concealing the identity of the owner by making us believe that ‘Yuuhei Ishihara’ really existed, right? And you chose

a messy relationship involving a lover because it would be hard to investigate such a matter, right?"

He doesn't exist, therefore we can conceal him—huh? I see. She's almost right.

But she's still off. Yuuhei Ishihara is indeed Ryuu Miyazaki's mother's lover. However, you could also say that he doesn't exist anymore.

After all, Yuuhei Ishihara is already dead.

"Was that it? If so, is it my turn now?"

Maria Otonashi scowls. I guess my sudden question is making her wary.

"…What do you want to discuss?"

"The topic should attract your interest, I think! Perhaps it's even something you've been trying to tickle out of me."

I smile as I speak

"I'll explain how the Sevennight in Mud works."

May 2nd (Saturday) 10:00

I look at each object within my field of vision, collect data and regain my identity as Kazuki Hoshino. The sky. Concrete. The ground. Sand. Maria Otonashi. My hand. Kazuki Hoshino. This place is the rear of the school building. I am—me.

I'm getting used to it, since I've switched identities several times already. But precisely because I'm getting used to it, I realize:

What I am experiencing is nothing less than a temporary *death*.

I completely vanish during the time when I'm not myself. I don't even dream. This is a 'death' that approaches me step by step. If I don't destroy the Sevennight in Mud by May 5th, I'm going to disappear forever. In other words, I'll 'die'.

"Kazuki?" The girl in front of me asks. I nod silently, but realize that this won't suffice and add "Yes, Aya."

Otonashi-san looks at her watch and frowns.

I notice a worn-out electric guitar lying at her feet.

"This thing? I brought it over from the light music club."

It's a really old guitar, but since all the strings are new, I suppose it's still in regular use.

…I bet she took it without permission.

"You know, I fiddled around with the guitar inside the Rejecting Classroom to kill time."

Otonashi-san picks up the electric guitar and starts to play. She does so quite skillfully. In contrast, I can barely play an F-chord. She quickly stops playing and holds the guitar out to me.

"Eh?"

"Play. I know that you received your sister's guitar as a hand-me-down."

"Ah, no… I can't play very well, you know?"

"I don't care. Play the guitar while I'm speaking. If you do so, I'll know when

you switch to Yuuhei Ishihara.”

I see. So that’s why she brought this guitar.

I’m a very poor guitar player, so it’s kind of embarrassing, but I eventually start playing a famous song from a classic rock group that I remember from my practice book.

“I’m surprised you know that I’ve got my sister’s guitar.”

“There’s nothing I don’t know about you,” she boldly says.

“…Did you not forget anything you learned within the Rejecting Classroom, Aya?” That question suddenly pops up in my head, so I ask her as I continue to clumsily play the guitar.

“Mh well, I remember everything. No… to be exact, I definitely forgot some things since there was such a long stretch of similar occurrences. But I basically remember almost everything.”

Otonashi-san frowns at me.

“Was your experience different, perhaps?”

“Yeah, I don’t remember much. My memories from back then are fleeting, more snapshots and blurry images than anything else. It’s like how you can’t remember the face of every person you pass by in town.”

After hearing what I have to say, Otonashi-san’s eyes widen, and she stands completely still.

“Eh? What’s wrong?”

“Ah, no—”

Upon noticing her obvious confusion, I feel even more perplexed than she seems to be.

“So you remember almost nothing of what we did together inside the box?”

“W-Well, yeah.”

“I…see…”

Otonashi-san remains silent for some reason. As I wait for her to continue, I look at her, but she hurriedly averts her eyes.

“Now that you mention it, it’s entirely plausible. There’s no way you’d retain your memories the way I did, because you aren’t an owner. I see, everything finally makes sense. So that’s why—” she continues murmuring with eyes averted “—that’s why you call me Aya.”

“Eh?”

“Nevermind.”

Otonashi-san regains her self-confidence and scowls at me.

“Hey, Kazuki. You stopped playing the guitar.”

I hurriedly start playing again. Since I’ve lost my place, I start from the beginning of the song.

“Geez, because you were babbling about trivialities, I couldn’t get to the important stuff.”

“Sorry. So back to relevancy?”

“…Hm, let’s see. Since I still don’t know whether I can believe what Yuuhei Ishihara told me, I’ll leave that out for now. I want to discuss this new box while I’m still confident that you’re ‘Kazuki Hoshino.’”

I nod and ask her to begin.

“You should understand that there are different kinds of boxes. It might be a flawed explanation, but just to keep it simple, there are boxes that operate internally and there are boxes that operate externally. While the Rejecting Classroom was more of an internal box, the Sevennight in Mud is more of an external box.”

“Hm? What’s the difference?”

“An internal box arises if an owner considers his wish to be impossible in the real world. For example, Kasumi Mogi, who was the owner of the Rejecting Classroom, didn’t believe that it was possible to relive the past. So she created a space removed from the real world where she could believe in her wish. Mogi crammed herself and her classmates into a box where she could believe that her wish was possible.”

I nod while continuing to play the guitar.

“An external box arises when an owner believes that his wish can occur in the real world. The owner of the Sevennight in Mud seems to believe that his wish can be granted through the power of the box. Indeed, taking over a body may seem plausible in real life, which means that there’s no need to create a special space outside of reality. That’s linked to why I still cannot properly perceive this box.”

“I’ll need some time to digest this, but… in short, a box will become external if you believe that your wish can actually come true in the real world, and internal otherwise?”

“Yeah, that’s it more or less. If we rated them numerically with a maximum score of 10, the Rejecting Classroom would get an internal score of 9 and the Sevennight in Mud would get an external score of 4. The higher the external score, the more that box will affect reality.”

It’s obvious that the influence of the Rejecting Classroom was almost nonexistent, since the classmates involved can’t even remember it.

In other words, does that mean that the Sevennight in Mud is different?

“Ah—”

I notice the cruel nature of my current situation.

I’m scorned by all of my classmates. What’s more, my relationships with Daiya, Kokone and Haruaki have all been messed up.

“So—so—, my ruined everyday life—”

“Exactly, it won’t return.”

The hand I was playing the guitar with comes to a halt.

The sounds coming from the guitar vanish.

It won’t return? My everyday life won’t return? My everyday life will remain corroded by the preternatural?

So—it doesn’t exist anymore.

The thing I want to regain doesn’t even exist anymore.

The moment I realize this, my sight turns black as if all the breakers of this world had been turned off in a single blow. I mean, I no longer have any goal. It’s pointless to destroy that box.

I completely lose sight of everything.

I don’t care anymore.

I start staggering away. Otonashi-san says something, and I say something in reply. I have no idea what she said or what I said, and I don’t care.

I want to scream.

But even when I scream, there is no one who can rescue me.

May 2nd (Saturday) 11:00

I'm in a convenience store for some reason, holding a weekly manga magazine. I check the time on Kazuki Hoshino's cell phone. I should be in my third period class right now… so why am I in a convenience store?

I look around, but Maria Otonashi is nowhere to be seen.

What's the meaning of this? They wouldn't have broken up, would they?

I worry that this might be a trap, but I can't ignore this opportunity to get in contact with Ryuu Miyazaki.

I enter his phone number from memory. The phone rings repeatedly; well, he should be in class, so he won't be able to answer the phone right away.

I cancel the call and clear the outgoing call log. Ryuu Miyazaki immediately calls me back.

"Hello? Ryuu Miyazaki?"

"……Hey, why are you using my full name?" *he asks, seeming a bit ill-tempered.*

"I am no one. 'Someone' you remember might have called you something different, I thought this was most natural for 'me.'"

"…Uh-huh. So, you want something from me, right? What is it?"

"Don't you mind that you have classes right now?"

"…You're the most important thing."

"What a thing for the class president to say… but I'm happy that you feel this way. Okay, I'd like to discuss how we should proceed."

"I don't think we should talk about that at school. Why don't you come over to my apartment?"

"I don't mind… But you realize that I can't tell whether 12:00 is my turn or not, right?"

"That's why I proposed my apartment. We just have to restrain Kazuki Hoshino in that place before 12:00. 13:00 is your turn again, isn't it?"

“Okay, so let me teach you a nice way to restrain someone! It’s actually how Maria Otonashi tricked me, you know—”

I explain what she did with handcuffs and footcuffs.

“Cuffs, huh? Sounds good. So can you buy some before we meet?”

“Sure.”

“You know where I live, right?”

“Yeah. Later then.”

I end the call and clear the call history with a few swift clicks.

Ryuu Miyazaki’s apartment, huh?

Now that I think about it, this’ll be my first time there. Until now, I held back from going there myself. How ironic that I’m only able to go there now that I am in a different body.

May 2nd (Saturday) 11:47

Ryuu Miyazaki's apartment is in a two-story wooden building, far less luxe than the complex that Maria Otonashi lives in; there are certainly no features like self-locking doors. I walk to his room on the second floor and ring the bell.

Ryuu Miyazaki promptly shows his face.

"Here—a present."

I hand him a brown paper bag containing a pair of handcuffs and footcuffs. Ryuu Miyazaki accepts it with almost no change in expression.

I take off my shoes and enter the room. It's about the size of six tatami mats. Although it's very cramped, he's been keeping things neat and tidy. As I sit down on the floor, I'm amazed by how much space his computer alone takes up.

"Ah right, I've been waiting to complain. You acted on your own and told Maria Otonashi some unnecessary things, didn't you?"

Ryuu Miyazaki smiles wryly. "The first thing out of your mouth is a complaint?"

"That girl picked up on your attempt to conceal our link. She already noticed that we are working together."

"So it's as I expected."

I raise an eyebrow because he seems to speak without a qualm.

"…I don't get it. So you deliberately revealed that you're my ally?"

"Duh, I guess so?"

Hey… that sounds like a really lame excuse.

"Maria Otonashi got suspicious just because I tried to reach out to Kazuki Hoshino. She's not some regular girl; so I concluded that I wouldn't be able to deceive her."

"But there's no need to go out of your way to tell her!"

"…Your goal is to make Kazuki Hoshino submit, right?"

“So what if it is?”

“Otonashi will definitely block your efforts, because you cannot attack Kazuki Hoshino directly. In other words, you can only attack ‘Kazuki Hoshino’ via Otonashi. But as you know, she’s brilliant. Any attack through Otonashi would be easily parried.”

“You do have a point, you know, but…”

“So I came up with the idea that you just need someone who can attack Kazuki Hoshino directly, instead of via Otonashi. Of course I’m the only one who can handle that.”

“True…”

“That’s why it’s best to clearly demonstrate that I’m on your side. But if I had made it too easy for her to find out, she would have been suspicious. That’s why I chose a roundabout approach!” he says indifferently.

A wry smile spontaneously floats onto my face. I didn’t think he’d been so thorough. He’s proven even more reliable than I imagined.

“I already have a plan up my sleeve.”

“Tell me more.”

“We’ll show him a corpse,” he suggests.

“Do you really think that will make him fall into despair? Sure, he’d be shocked after seeing a corpse, but…you know…”

Upon hearing my objections, Ryuu Miyazaki starts to grin.

“And what if we told him that he just killed that person?”

This is—most interesting.

I start to smile as well.

“Don’t you worry; I’ll make Kazuki Hoshino fall into despair without fail,” Ryuu Miyazaki declares as he ransacks the bag I gave him, and throws me a pair of handcuffs.

May 2nd (Saturday) 12:00

Who is the guy in front of me? I peer at him and notice the sharp gaze of Ryuu Miyazaki, only without the filter of his glasses.

Why is Miyazaki-kun…?

I'm cuffed, hand-and-foot, in a small room that I have never seen before. The gravity of my situation is quite clear.

What exactly did I do before I switched? …I can't remember. When I had realized that my ordinary life wouldn't return, my sight went black—and then I ended up in this room before I knew it.

"This is my room. I restrained you."

"…Why?"

"Why, you ask? Didn't 'Yuuhei Ishihara' explain it to you? It's to make you surrender."

In other words, Miyazaki-kun is acting for the sake of Yuuhei Ishihara, and not for himself?

"Hoshino, has Otonashi explained the details of this *box*?"

I shake my head.

"So she kept it secret, huh. Well, that's probably a wise decision. Yuuhei Ishihara said that he had told her with the expectation that she'd inform you, you know?"

Come to think of it, I think she was about to tell me something that she had heard from Yuuhei Ishihara.

"I'll explain it to you instead! …haha! Things are really so much more straightforward now that I've revealed my enmity."

"…enmity? What?"

"Never mind that. …so, you know that this box will erase your existence within one week, right?"

"Yes …But may I first point something out?"

“What is it?”

“I cannot trust anything you say. After all, you’re my enemy, aren’t you? I can’t just accept your explanation at face value since you’ve been trying to deceive me from day one.”

“Quite right.” Miyazaki-kun readily accepts my words and doesn’t show any unease. “I’ve started to wonder if I have what it takes to be a con artist—that’s my new discovery. But I’m only going to tell you the truth now. Feel free to verify it on your own. If you don’t want to listen, just cover your ears. …Well, you can’t really do that because of the handcuffs…” he says emotionlessly. He approaches me and hands over a piece of paper cut out from a notebook.

00-01	01-02	23-24	1st day	
02-03	03-04	04-05	2nd day	
11-12	13-14	15-16	3rd day	
09-10			4th day	
			5th day	
			6th day	
			7th day	End

“This is a note that Yuuhei Ishihara gave me.”

Which means that Yuuhei Ishihara wrote it. His handwriting, and his rounded letters, is surprisingly neat.

“Today’s the fourth day.”

‘09-10’ is all that was written on the fourth line. Though there are always three number pairs, this line only has one. There were none after that, either.

“What on earth do those numbers mean…?”

“Hoshino, haven’t you noticed that your time decreases day by day?”

“…Huh?”

“Your time as ‘Kazuki Hoshino’ gets stolen by ‘Yuuhei Ishihara’ bit by bit everyday! This note is a listing of the hours that have been stolen from you. For example, ‘00-01’ means that the time from 00:00 until 01:00 has been stolen from ‘Kazuki Hoshino’ by ‘Yuuhei Ishihara.’”

I take another look at the note. The pair of numbers, ‘09-10’, can be found on

today’s date row. Which means that Yuuhei Ishihara controlled my body today from nine o’clock until ten o’clock. Indeed, I wasn’t conscious at that time.

“So he just steals three hours of my day? It doesn’t increase?”

“…hey, you ought to think a little more before you speak. I said ‘the time gets stolen.’ That time isn’t stolen only that day. That time stays in the possession of ‘Yuuhei Ishihara’ thereafter. For example, the hour that has been stolen from you between 00:00 and 01:00 won’t be yours again.”

I still have trouble understanding.

“Gosh, do you still not get it? Mh… maybe it’s easier if you divide one day into 24 blocks and imagine having three of them stolen every day. Your blocks decrease to 21 on the first day, 18 on the second day, 15 on the third day. And on the seventh day, there will only be 3 blocks left. The moment the date changes to the eighth day, none will remain. In other words: Game Over.”

I finally understand.

I also understand why he explained this to me. You’d think that teaching me about the Sevennight in Mud is a disadvantage for Yuuhei Ishihara. The reason he taught me anyway is—

“Ah, it seems like you noticed. You get it, right? Therefore, this can’t be a lie. A lie yields hope when you realize that it’s a lie. On the other hand, when you realize that a cruel fact is really true, you fall into even deeper despair. And you have to realize, if you think back a little, that this is really what’s happening to you, right?”

Right. My body tells me that it’s the truth, too.

“Shall I do the math for you? ‘Kazuki Hoshino’ has 7 blocks left today, including the time now, 9 tomorrow on May 3rd, 6 on May 4th, and 3 on May 5th. Counting just your full blocks, that’s 24 altogether. Do you get it? You don’t even have one day’s time left!”

Miyazaki-kun spoke in order to corner me.

“To corner you by telling you the truth. This is why Yuuhei Ishihara revealed this information. Thus, I’m telling you the unvarnished truth.”

“I still have four days left.” I really had been thinking that way. But that was a big mistake. The direction of the battle has already tipped in Yuuhei Ishihara’s favor.

When considering the time we spend in this body, “Kazuki Hoshino” has

already become the minority existence.

Furthermore, Yuuhei Ishihara has Ryuu Miyazaki as his partner.

Oh. It really is hopeless already.

“I’m surprised that you’re so composed.”

Now that he mentions it… Despite this hopeless situation, I feel calm.

Which is… understandable.

After all, I already fell into despair, even without this latest piece of bad news.

“Hey, Miyazaki-kun. May I ask you something?”

“What is it?”

“Why do you assist Yuuhei Ishihara?”

My question seems to have been unexpected—Miyazaki-kun keeps silent.

“You wouldn’t assist him if there weren’t a really important reason, would you? Furthermore, if *Yuuhei Ishihara* told you that he’s controlling my body, you wouldn’t readily believe such a thing. Right?”

…Mhh, yeah. Let me try to trick him.

“Here’s a reason—for example—you are actually Yuuhei Ishihara.”

An ridiculous argument which would be cause for great amusement if it were wrong.

But Miyazaki-kun maintains his sharp gaze and keeps quiet.

“……I’m Yuuhei Ishihara, huh? Well—”

Miyazaki-kun smiles bitterly and continues.

“That’s right.”

“—Huh?”

His unexpected words make me lose my speech.

“Honestly, I was already tired of it. I would never have dreamed that hiding it would exhaust me like this. So I want to explain where I’m coming from to get some relief.”

Miyazaki-kun sighs. He seems very tired.

“Hoshino. Is there something that’s important to you?”

“…There is.”

Maybe ‘there was’ would be more accurate. My everyday life has been

destroyed, after all.

“So you should be able to understand my feelings. In my opinion, a truly important thing is not something you take care of with utmost devotion nor something you concentrate your lovey-dovey love on. I think a really important thing is something that becomes your stem. So if it is lost, you end up broken as if your spine were removed and end up an empty shell. Therefore, a truly important thing is—equal to oneself.”

“Your ‘that’s right’ just now didn’t imply that you are ‘Yuuhei Ishihara,’ right?”

“Of course not. If I were him, I would never permit such detestable behavior.”

But he is supporting such behavior on the part of Yuuhei Ishihara, because Yuuhei Ishihara is so important to him.

“If this is his wish, I’ll make it happen. I’ll do anything to protect him, even if it’s wrong.”

His attitude is neither proud nor stubborn. He bitterly bites his lips and his eyes show resignation, but his will is utterly unwavering.

“…I understand what you mean! But why is Yuuhei Ishihara so important to you?”

Miyazaki-kun mutters a “…hm” and continues.

“Probably… no, not probably. I’m sure of it. He’s so important to me because __”

He spits out some words, seeming displeased.

“—I’m their older brother.”

“Older brother? Huh?” I couldn’t immediately comprehend his interjection. “So you were lying about your relationship with Yuuhei Ishihara? …huh? But…eeh…”

“Yuuhei Ishihara is my mother’s lover. That’s true.”

“…umm, so, Yuuhei Ishihara and ‘Yuuhei Ishihara’ are completely different individuals to begin with?”

“Yeah. Using that bastard’s name made everything more complicated, but you’re right.”

“So your younger brother’s inside me, not Yuuhei Ishihara…”

Is Yuuhei Ishihara so important to Miyazaki-kun that he calls himself “Yuuhei Ishihara,” just because they’re blood related? …no, I can’t really understand

this level of emotion. I have an older sister, and of course she's important to me. But I'd never do anything like this for Luu-chan.

"Didn't I tell you about my family environment." Miyazaki-kun says, without directly addressing my question.

"Everything I said was true, except I concealed that I'm his brother. The divorce destroyed my life. Children have to rely on their parents, but my parents told me 'We don't need you!'. That I'm a hindrance. That I'm trash. That I'm a mistake. My entire life was destroyed. It may sound clichéd, but I was in total despair. I no longer felt human anymore."

He smiles in self-derision and continues.

"But I wasn't the only one who no longer felt human. My brother, who remained in my mother's custody—that other non-human saved me. I guess my dependence was unhealthy, but I came back to life thanks to it. He became my stem and I could no more live without him than my spine."

He scowls at me.

"I don't ever want to be no longer human again. I will protect—myself."

I thoroughly understand that Miyazaki-kun's younger brother is precious to him.

"…But I can't comprehend it."

Miyazaki-kun wordlessly urges me to continue.

"How will 'he' find true happiness by becoming Kazuki Hoshino? I don't think you're helping by protecting him. I believe he has to find the right way to be himself."

"You're right, I guess."

Surprisingly, Miyazaki-kun agrees without hesitation.

"So—"

"Don't bother to spell it out! I know. I'm aware of all that, but it's already too late!"

"…Huh?"

May 2nd (Saturday) 14:00

I discover why it's 'too late'.

Though I can't come to terms with the sight before my eyes *that* quickly, it was definitely too late.

"These are the corpses of my mother and Yuuhei Ishihara."

I'm in yet another residence unknown to me. I see a normal living room without any noteworthy features.

…Except for the red liquid that's been splashed everywhere.

I look at the bodies.

There's the corpse of a middle-aged woman. Her head is split open, her brains are scattered everywhere and her head has been reshaped into a crescent moon.

There's the corpse of a middle-aged man, which was probably the real Yuuhei Ishihara.

His head is split open, just like the woman's. In addition, his limbs are bent at bizarre angles as if his joints have been completely destroyed. It's a gruesome scene, suggesting that someone held an enormous grudge.

At any rate, it really stinks in here.

"Aah—"

The stench causes me to calmly observe the corpses, and I make a mental leap. Why—is this here?

"This is his attack on you!"

A fluorescent lamp palely illuminates the two corpses.

"These murders were committed with Kazuki Hoshino's body. You know what that means, right? As long you're Kazuki Hoshino, you won't be able to get away from the sin of murder. When you get caught by the police, Kazuki Hoshino will be punished."

His voice already echoes from a distance and doesn't quite reach my ears properly.

Miyazaki-kun looks at me, but then faintly sighs.

"……was the scenario we planned to use to corner you, but let's scrap that. As I told you before, despair that was born from a lie will become hope when the truth is revealed. Those corpses are the cause. The cause that made him want to take over your body."

"The cause…?"

What if murdering these two people was the trigger that made "him" want to steal my body?

Based on Miyazaki-kun's statements, I suppose "he" considers his life to be full of misfortune. What would "he" wish for if he obtained the box after such an incident? I doubt he'd want to regain his life.

He wouldn't want to be himself anymore. Therefore, he would want to steal another man's body.

"…I understood how the owner ended up making such a wish! But.. I don't really understand why you'd help him realize this Sevennight in Mud. Wouldn't it be better to tell him to destroy the box and turn himself in…?"

"If he went to prison, I wouldn't be able to be by his side anymore, would I?"

Indeed. But still, surely going to prison is still better than becoming another person?

"You look like you still don't understand…ah, I see. There's no reason you'd know this. Say, have you never wondered: if he's inside you, where is his original body right now?"

Come to think of it, that never came up. I assumed that he vanished since he's inside my body.

"I'll answer that question! Take out your phone."

That's all I need to hear to understand what's going on. I take out my cell phone, open the data folder and check the voice files. There's a new one.

I play the file.

"My original body? I've already killed it!"

I stop breathing.

So "he" committed suicide after killing his mother and Yuuhei Ishihara? Why engage in such a foolish act…!?

"I mean, isn't it just a hindrance? I have no need for that body —I'm not that kid anymore!"

……Wait! So in other words—

“It’s too late; got it? I can’t protect the person I want to protect anymore.”

—Right, it’s already too late.

Not only for Miyazaki-kun, but also for me.

After all “his” original body died. Which means that the owner died. Which also means that there’s no way to destroy the box anymore.

In short—the ultimate outcome of the Sevennight in Mud cannot be prevented anymore.

It’s too late. We are entirely too late.

“My only choice is to make the Sevennight in Mud come true.” He spits out these words so plainly that I immediately realize that he’s choking off his emotions.

He distinctly says: “So, Hoshino—I think I’m going to erase you.”

He slowly raises his pale head; his eyes are—blank.

“I’ll completely mow down your will to resist.”

Without looking in my eyes, Miyazaki-kun continues to speak.

“But I can’t rest after doing just this, because there’s Maria Otonashi to deal with. So I’ve been thinking about making you surrender and stopping Maria Otonashi. I’ve been thinking about how to do both at the same time.”

Miyazaki-kun’s mouth twists slightly, and he continues.

“Capturing Otonashi. But by having you do it.”

“…And this makes me surrender?”

“Yeah. Think about it: if we capture Otonashi and confine her until May 6th, she can no longer endanger us—that’s obvious enough. If Otonashi can’t make a move, the Sevennight in Mud won’t be averted.”

So betraying Otonashi-san is equivalent to abandoning my last resort.

It would mean that I’ve surrendered.

“So let’s move on to the execution—Hoshino, I’m going to confine you within my room and use you as a trap to capture Otonashi. I’ll drag you along, no matter how much you resist. I won’t hesitate to use violence. Well, resistance will be pointless once you switch identities again.”

“Then… why don’t you just wait until I switch?”

“If I did that, you might try to rationalize what happened by saying that you

were held against your will. Unless you betray Maria Otonashi of your own accord, it's meaningless. After all, we have to make you surrender completely."

……I see.

"So what are you gonna do? Wanna try to resist?"

Miyazaki-kun takes a pair of brass knuckles out of his pocket and puts them on. The look in his eyes clearly indicates that he's not bluffing.

Should I betray Maria Otonashi—no, Aya Otonashi?

What is there to betray? We don't trust each other right now. Also, Miyazaki-kun might not have noticed yet, but I've lost my will to resist ever since I found out that my everyday life has been lost for good.

Should I fight against Miyazaki-kun? No way. Why should I choose a painful and pointless path?

"____"

But I still can't say it.

I can't say a sentence as simple as "I will betray Otonashi-san."

Why not? I don't get it. Nothing will change if I don't say it. I have already given up and when the time for the switch comes, I'm going to be imprisoned. The outcome won't change. Still, when I try to vocalize my betrayal, there's a burning pain in my chest.

"M-Miyazaki-kun, say—"

Bam.

"—Ugh!"

Miyazaki-kun hit me. I fall to my knees and can't even speak.

Miyazaki-kun's expression remains blank as he looks down on me. He won't listen to anything I have to say. He will strike without mercy if I show any signs of resistance.

I know. I can only choose betrayal.

Isn't that OK? After all, Aya Otonashi's an enemy.

He grabs my shoulders and makes me stand up. He holds his fist against my defenseless stomach.

"Come on, let me hear your words of betrayal!"

"You may—"

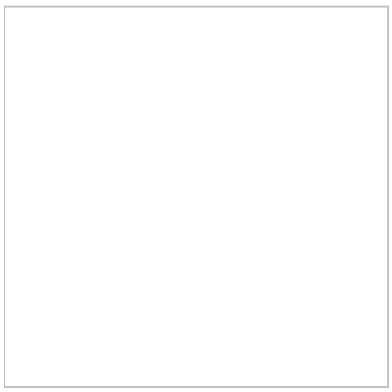
This has no meaning, so there should be no reason to hesitate.

So why—

“You may—imprison me.”

Why does my heart seem to break when I say those words?

May 2nd (Saturday) 23:10



I’m dreaming.

I’m dreaming the same dream once again.

May 3rd

May 3rd (Sunday) 07:12

I wake up. It's not the sensation of switching identities, but rather the normal sensation of awakening.

I'm lying on the floor of Miyazaki's room. My hands and feet are cuffed.

Miyazaki-kun is sitting on the bed. There are dark circles under his eyes. Maybe he hasn't been sleeping properly as of late.

When he notices that I'm awake, he wipes my face with a washcloth. The menthol from the washcloth wipes away the last of my sleepiness.

After wiping my face, without even greeting me, he says: "I'll instruct you now."

"You will restrain Otonashi by putting handcuffs and footcuffs on her and demonstrate your willingness to betray her by doing so. That's all you need to do. Simple, isn't it?"

"…really?"

"Ah?"

"Will you really believe that I've surrendered if I do it?"

[He] is free to judge my actions. He might be unwilling to accept this as 'surrender' and demand an even worse act of absurdity.

"He said that he'd be satisfied once he can steal Maria Otonashi from you."

"Steal…?"

An e-mail from a while back suddenly comes to mind.

"My deepest desire has been granted. Now we can be together forever."

I finally understand the meaning of those words.

It seems like [he] mistakenly thought we were lovers. Thus, he's under the impression that he could go out with her after completing the Sevennight in Mud.

But that makes no sense. It's impossible to steal everything from me just by taking over my identity.

“You cannot steal her from me!”

“I can.”

I almost jump. A voice that shouldn’t be here somehow replies to my muttering.

“I am Kazuki Hoshino and no one else! I’ll be able to possess her this way.”

The voice is coming from the speakers next to the computer that Miyazaki-kun is controlling.

“Do you think this is absurd? Do you think that I cannot become Kazuki Hoshino because you already are?”

Of course. Only [I] am Kazuki Hoshino, so no one else could be.

“So tell me, what makes Kazuki Hoshino Kazuki Hoshino? It can’t just be your personality. After all, you would still recognize someone you haven’t met in ages as the same person, even if his disposition and personality have changed completely with time, right?”

Hearing [his] words, I recalled something [he] once said.

“So tell me: when you see someone acting a bit unusually, would you think right away ‘This is someone else. Someone took him over.’?”

“—Ugh!”

Indeed, Daiya, Kokone and Haruaki have all recognized [him] as Kazuki Hoshino. Even Otonashi-san, with whom I have spent more time than anyone else—

“Even Maria Otonashi cannot distinguish [Kazuki Hoshino] from [Yuuhei Ishihara], correct?”

“…Uh”

“Well, since she knows of the boxes, she might perceive [Kazuki Hoshino]‘s disappearance as a disappearance of Kazuki Hoshino’s entire existence. Thus, I’ll teach her that Kazuki Hoshino won’t disappear when I take him over. By doing so, Kazuki Hoshino will continue to exist within her.”

A chuckle resounds from the speakers.

“And I’ll finally be able to obtain her.”

As long as Kazuki Hoshino’s external appearance is preserved, he will be recognized as Kazuki Hoshino, even if he’s different internally. This is certainly true. So I don’t think he’s spouting complete nonsense.

…but it’s a stretch to say that he could become Kazuki Hoshino.

“Do you find this logic too extreme?”

I shut my mouth-Miyazaki-kun read me perfectly.

“Hoshino, what would you do if you learned that someone important to you has a split personality?”

“Eh?”

I frown upon hearing this sudden example.

“Is your special person only one of those personalities? Would you carefully distinguish between the personalities and say ‘that one is important to me,’ ‘I don’t need that one,’ ‘I don’t mind that one’? You wouldn’t, right? At the end of the day, the personalities are irrelevant—your special person is a single human.”

“……You could be right.”

“Thus, it doesn’t really matter whether the person inside is [Kazuki Hoshino] or [Yuuhei Ishihara]. If she still accepts that I’m Kazuki Hoshino, her feelings will remain constant. It’s not [your] personality that Maria Otonashi considers important, I’m sure, rather it’s—”

Miyazaki-kun continues without altering his expression in the slightest.

“—Kazuki Hoshino’s existence itself.”

His words contain some hidden power.

He wasn’t just speaking in order to corner me.

“…but I’m afraid I’m not such a special person to her.”

He smiles wryly.

“You might not have noticed, since you’re too closely involved. But I know. Otonashi is dependent on you! So it will be hard for Maria Otonashi to endure losing you when your personality disappears. She will try to find something to fill that gap. It’s obvious how she’ll compensate for her loss, isn’t it?”

“…you think it’ll be [Yuuhei Ishihara]?”

“Not exactly. It’s Kazuki Hoshino who will certainly continue to live, albeit slightly altered.”

“That’s why [he] will obtain her eventually…? This is only your suitable guess. Why can you be so convinced?”

“Because she’s the same as me,” Miyazaki-kun says in an annoying tone.

“Eh?”

“Because I’m depending on someone like Maria Otonashi does. That’s why I can easily predict what she’s going to do.”

I finally understand why there’s such power behind his words.

Miyazaki-kun knows how it feels when a special person disappears and turns into someone else.

“Stop being so nitpicky. You just have to betray Maria Otonashi. If you do so, she will start confusing [Kazuki Hoshino] with [Yuuhei Ishihara].”

“…Why?”

“Otonashi would never dream that [Kazuki Hoshino] would betray her. Even if you were to handcuff her, she would assume it was [Yuuhei Ishihara]. But in reality, it was [Kazuki Hoshino] who did the deed. Consequently, she will become unable to confidently distinguish between the two of you. The borderline between [Kazuki Hoshino] and [Yuuhei Ishihara] will disappear.”

And then she’s going to consider [me] and [him] to be the same.

If she feels this way by May 6th, Otonashi-san will accept my replacement without resistance, even if [he] steals everything from me. That’s what Miyazaki-kun is saying.

“Did you get it? Okay, I’ll instruct you, then.”

“…Wait a sec.”

I interrupt him.

“What?”

“What do you plan to do when [he]‘s not convinced that he’s completely stolen Otonashi-san from me?”

I think I know what’s going to happen.

We aren’t going out, after all. Thus, it’s not possible to steal her from me. Things can’t go as [he] planned.

“Won’t you be making her suffer? Will you still use me?”

Miyazaki-kun keeps silent for a moment, and fails to deny it. “I guess so.”

And he adds without reservation—

“So what?”

“‘So what’…? U-Under no circumstances could I… do that. I agreed to betray her. But that doesn’t mean that I want to trouble her to—”

“Do you want me to hit you again?”

“……Even if you do, I won’t do it!”

I don’t care if I have to suffer. Right now, I merely have to endure the pain.

But I absolutely cannot accept that someone has to get hurt because of me. This has nothing to do with her being my ally or not, I just cannot accept it.

He observes me for a while, but in the end he just sighs regretfully for some reason.

“You’re okay with that?”

“……with what?”

“If violence won’t get the job done, then we just have to use a different kind of threat, you know?”

“…What do you mean?”

Miyazaki-kun doesn’t answer my question and remains silent.

May 3rd (Sunday) 08:45

I am standing in front of Kazuki Hoshino's home.

"Huh, your idea is really nasty."

"How so? If it's for your sake, this is the natural solution. And anyway, you'll be the one who executes it, right?" he calmly says.

"Do you think this underwear-girl will obediently follow my commands? If not, she'd be pitiful."

"Well, I'll pray for it to go well!"

Ryuu Miyazaki responds with some shallow words, as if he has almost no interest in what's going to happen.

No—Perhaps he really has no interest.

Faced with his inability to do anything in response to <u>that</u> incident, all other issues might pale in comparison. I have no real basis for this theory, but it springs to mind anyway.

"Okay, I'll start."

"Ok."

It's only natural, but I open the door without ringing the bell.

"I'm home."

I climb up to the second floor.

As always, Luka Hoshino is sleeping in just her underwear.

May 3rd (Sunday) 10:06

Miyazaki-kun presses a mobile phone against my ear.

“N-NOOO!!”

I hear a loud scream coming from the phone. I immediately recognize the screamer’s voice. After all, it’s someone I hear almost every day.

“Luu-chan…!!”

“Why are you doing this?! Stop it, Kazu-chan!!”

“Ah—”

What… what did he do!? What did he use my body to do to Luu-chan!?

“This happened because you didn’t listen to us like a good boy!”

“But Luu-chan has absolutely nothing to do with this! So why did you do such a—!!”

“Because she has nothing to do with this, you’ll suffer. That’s exactly why we did this!”

Upon hearing these words, I instinctively try to throw myself at him—but fail and fall to the ground in an unsightly heap. I forgot that I was still restrained with footcuffs. As I crawl around, Miyazaki-kun steps on me and presses the cell phone against my ear.

“Uuh…”

Since I can’t even cover my ears, I close my eyes instead, even though doing so is pointless.

I hear: *“Just kidding~~~!”*

“Huh…?”

“Kazu-chan, why do you want me to say such things? Big sis is becoming anxious about your future.”

Dumbfounded, I raise my head and look at Miyazaki-kun.

What on earth? It was all a joke…?

Miyazaki-kun removes his foot from my body. I sit up while staring on him, even as he still remains expressionless.

“Why are you relaxing, Hoshino?”

“Eh?”

“Those were sound files recorded with the ‘My Voice’-feature. They’re not happening in real time. What if I reversed the order of those files? Maybe the sound file you just heard happened first?”

“Y-You can’t…!”

“Just kidding!”

“Ugh…”

I feel miserable because I’m so gullible.

“Geez… why are you swinging back and forth from joy to sorrow? The problem isn’t whether she was actually hurt or not, is it? The problem is that Luka Hoshino’s completely defenseless against [Yuuhei Ishihara]‘s actions. ”

Miyazaki-kun turned the foot on my body around.

“[Yuuhei Ishihara] will become Kazuki Hoshino. Can’t you imagine how much of a hindrance having a sister would be? Heck, you’re living in the same room! Of course she’d notice Kazuki Hoshino’s transformation, and it would be impossible to terminate your relationship since you’re siblings. She’s the person who might become the greatest barrier. That seems to be why he’s indecisive: How should he deal with her?”

Having said this, Miyazaki-kun made a double click and begins to play another voice file.

“[Kazuki Hoshino]: you will betray Maria Otonashi for us, won’t you?”

This is a threat.

A simple threat that he will kill Luka Hoshino if I don’t obey.

“So what will you do, Hoshino?”

If I handcuff Otonashi-san, she might end up getting hurt. But If I don’t, Luu-chan might die.

There’s no way I could decide! —However, Otonashi-san won’t be killed. Also, she might be able to overcome the situation with her brilliant skills. No, she’ll definitely be able to do it.

—she will defeat us.

May 3rd (Sunday) 21:04

“I’m surprised Otonashi is taking such a long time to get here. I was sure she’d know where to go right away,” Miyazaki-kun says.

“Well, she might not have noticed that you’re being imprisoned. [Yuuhei Ishihara] did go back to your house just now, after all. However, she should realize that’s something’s up since her calls are being blocked… Hmm, Hoshino, did you guys have a big fight that would justify your blocking her calls?”

I can’t answer—I can’t remember what happened when we last parted, since everything was lost in a black cloud of despair.

“Well, I guess it doesn’t matter. We’re going to proceed anyway,” he says and takes out my cell phone.

He didn’t do anything until now because [my] time to be in control today had been unclear. But my time window for the day is now settled, once 19:00 was stolen from me. I’ll be in control until 23:00.

“…Ah, that reminds me,” Miyazaki-kun then takes out some packing tape and sticks two pieces over my mouth. Since I’m already handcuffed, I can’t remove it.

He makes a call. It’s obvious who he’s calling.

“Hello?”

“……Who are you?”

The room is silent. Even I can clearly hear Otonashi-san’s voice.

“Ryuu Miyazaki!”

“…Miyazaki, why are you calling me from Kazuki’s cell phone? What happened to Kazuki? I knew that you were [Yuuhei Ishihara]‘s partner, but —”

“Partner? As if I’d help out that piece of shit! He merely found my weak spot and blackmailed me.”

What is he saying…?

“Your weak spot?”

“Yeah. I’m not supporting him, he merely found a chink in my armor and used me. But I’ve had enough! Fortunately, I’ve come up with a simple solution to my problems.”

“A simple solution…?”

“It should be easy for you to grasp. It’s really simple.”

“…Don’t tell me—”

“Exactly. I just have to kill Kazuki Hoshino.”

Miyazaki-kun speaks indifferently and emotionlessly. Only now do I realize that this is just a pretext. His performance just seems too natural. Even though I know the truth, for a second there I was about to buy into his fake story.

So I don’t think Otonashi-san will be able to see through his lies.

“…What are you saying? I don’t know what kind of weak spot he targeted, but that’s just too risky. I never thought you’d be stupid enough to make that kind of choice?”

“It’s so easy to see right through you; you seem surprisingly bad at deceit.”

“…..”

“Murder is definitely a risky gamble. It wouldn’t be worth it. But that doesn’t apply to Kazuki Hoshino right now. You should know why, right?”

“…I have no idea.”

“Haha, don’t play dumb! Okay, then I’ll tell you. The risk-free murder opportunity is to ‘just take advantage of the moment of the shift.’”

Otonashi-san already picked up on this, I suppose. After all, she told me yesterday that it would be dangerous if I switched identities while riding her motorcycle. If someone took that idea to its logical conclusion, it would be dead easy to fake a fatal accident or suicide.

This is what he means by risk-free murder.

“If I’m able to put an end to this threat, I’ll happily do it.”

“…Why are you telling me about this?”

“There’s someone I’d like to shoot if I had a vanishing bullet, right? But by using this bullet, I’ll also erase someone I have no grudge against. Since he’s just too pitiful, I thought I might allow him to speak to his lover one last time right before the very end.”

“Just how selfish are you…!?”

“Oh? Hoshino has only a few hours left, you know? He’s as good as dead! But rest assured; I’ll only kill him when he’s [Yuuhei Ishihara]. I’ll gently euthanize him. Isn’t he lucky? He’ll die before being taken over completely by that scumbag.”

“Kazuki will regain his body!”

“That’s just your personal opinion, isn’t it? No one else would be able to be so optimistic in such a situation!”

“Gah…”

“Well, that’s all. Okay, I’ll let you hear his last words.”

Of course, he doesn’t remove the tape from my mouth.

Instead, he moves his mouse and double-clicks. My voice resounds from the speakers.

“Please save me—”

That line sounds really cheesy. If only—

“—Aya!”

—he didn’t mention that name.

How do they know about that name…? They don’t know about the Rejecting Classroom, so they shouldn’t be aware of that name.

No… they might know it. I have used that name in classroom 2-3. Miyazaki-kun surely realized that it had to be some kind of code and reported it to [Yuuhei Ishihara].

But she doesn’t know that [he]‘s saying those words, so she won’t pick up on that. Therefore—

“……I’ll come to save you right away, Kazuki.”

—she believes that I’m the one speaking.

“You made a mistake,” Otonashi-san declares.

“You should of called me just before Kazuki Hoshino switches to [Yuuhei Ishihara]. It’s 21:12 right now. The earliest you can act is 22:00. I’ll defeat you and take back Kazuki in the next 48 minutes.”

It’s a failed announcement.

She doesn’t realize that her words won’t unsettle him; rather, they’ll let him rest easy.

May 3rd (Sunday) 21:32

And then she arrives, not even 20 minutes after that phone call ended.

The window is broken and splintered glass is scattered across the room. She smashed the glass with her sneakers and is now standing in the center of the room in her regular clothing.

“…You already knew my whereabouts, otherwise you couldn’t have arrived that quickly?”

Miyazaki-kun is looking at her from the corridor right in front of the entryway, and holding a kitchen knife against me.

“Did you really think it was hard to suss out? You’d never make such a phone call in public. So you’d most likely be at home, don’t you think? After all, what other place would come to mind?”

“But didn’t you still get here too fast?”

“I already knew where you lived back when you revealed your partnership with [Yuuhei Ishihara]. …Come on, haven’t you done enough already? Take your hands off Kazuki. Didn’t you say that you don’t want to take on the risk of murder? If you stab him, you’ll take on more than just a risk. You’re sure to get punished for inflicting serious bodily harm or worse.”

“Shut up.”

“There’s no need to get panicked just because things didn’t go as planned. Isn’t your goal to not be threatened by [Yuuhei Ishihara] anymore? Hand Kazuki over to me and I promise to stop [Yuuhei Ishihara]‘s threats!”

“That’s just a hollow promise, isn’t it?”

He acts as if he’s irritated and ignores her.

Why is Miyazaki-kun doing this?

—he’s raising the drop height.

Miyazaki-kun is acting out the role of a generic enemy and trying to set the stage so that the impact of my betrayal will be even more powerful.

Otonashi-san is going to defeat the enemy, Miyazaki-kun, and then save me.

Of course she will feel relieved and pleased.

And then I'll betray her.

Thus, for the sake of this 'drop height,' Miyazaki-kun must not make it too easy for her to rescue me.

"Buzz off! Didn't you already have your last rendezvous?"

"Stop your mockery!"

But why isn't Otonashi-san immediately attacking him?

Sure, his knife is currently pressed against my throat. But that's a meaningless threat. Miyazaki-kun wouldn't stab me since he supposedly wants to commit a risk-free murder in order to avoid being threatened.

"You know, I thought you were a logical person with a firm will."

That means she knows that he doesn't plan to stab me.

But she still isn't stepping forward.

"Cool down, Miyazaki."

I guess she can't rule out the possibility that I might still get stabbed. Miyazaki-kun might lose his temper and stab me by mistake.

……Is this the reason?

Is she holding back because she's not completely sure that he won't harm me?

"……"

No way, huh.

After all, there's no reason for her to be that concerned about my welfare.

I still don't know why, but Otonashi-san isn't making a move. It's a deadlock.

Miyazaki-kun pokes my flank with his left hand, hidden from her gaze.

……I know!

I received instructions for what to do in a deadlock. I didn't want to follow them, but it seems like I have no choice.

He told me not to hold back, because then she would notice that we're just putting on a performance. I swallow my saliva and proceed to act.

I—bite Miyazaki's hand as hard as I can.

"…Uwaa!!"

His scream is a reaction to the pain with no acting involved. Miyazaki-kun

smoothly drops the knife as we arranged beforehand.

We created an opening, and Otonashi-san leaps upon this opportunity.

It truly happens in a split second.

We're in a tiny six tatami-sized room. In a single moment, she is already directly in front of our eyes. She rushes toward him and head-butts his nose. She steps into the space between me and Miyazaki-kun and drives him back by hitting his chin even while he holds his nose. She then quickly picks up the knife and throws it out of his reach.

"Step back, Kazuki."

I nod and obey.

Otonashi-san also steps back and starts to speak.

"Give me the keys to the handcuffs and footcuffs, Miyazaki. I'll let you go without any further punishment."

"……You're softer than I thought," Miyazaki-kun says while suppressing his nose bleed with his hands.

"You could have just as well choked me. I would've had to give you the keys."

"…There's no need to go that far."

Those words trigger my memory. Right. Otonashi-san doesn't like to use violence. She was willing to fight because she had to in order 'to save me'. But she would never be able to choke just to make him give her a set of keys.

Miyazaki-kun alters his stance, and then he jumps and tries to grab her. But as soon as he touches her, Miyazaki-kun flies through the air.

"Wha—!!"

He's no longer acting, he's genuinely surprised.

It happened so quickly he didn't even have time to perceive his own defeat. She dealt with him by performing a magnificent shoulder throw.

"If you approach me, I'll knock you down."

"…Damn, I didn't know you were a Black Belt in Judo!"

"It's no wonder. After all I'm just a White Belt. …Well, I have defeated several Black Belts already, though."

After saying that, she puts him in a Kesa-Gatame [1]

"Ugh…"

“I heard a metallic sound when I threw you.”

She searches through Miyazaki’s pockets with her free hand. She finds the object in question in no time flat and throws it to me. The objects that fall with a metallic clink on the floor are the keys to my handcuffs and footcuffs.

“Kazuki, what time is it exactly?”

“…21:39.”

“So we’re all good. Kazuki, take your cell phone and immediately escape over the veranda. I’ll follow you in five minutes. Until then, I’ll make sure this guy’s unable to move.”

Miyazaki-kun quickly peeks at me. Don’t worry, I’m not going to follow her instructions.

But because of the Kesa-Gatame, I’m unable to handcuff her. What should I do? I can’t restrain her like this.

I drop my gaze.

And see something…which is when I hit upon…

I hit upon the worst, and thus, most meaningful, way to betray her.

Aah, if I do this I’ll become Aya Otonashi’s worst enemy. I already made my decision, so I assumed that things might end up like this. But this is really just too bad.

The keys she threw me don’t fit. The appropriate keys were in my possession all along.

Using them, I remove the cuffs.

Once I’m free, I pick up—the kitchen knife Otonashi-san had thrown to me.

“Aya.”

I point the knife at Otonashi-san.

She will recognize right away that I lack the guts to stab her. But that doesn’t matter. It doesn’t change the fact that I’m betraying her.

“Let go of Miyazaki-kun.”

Otonashi-san sees the kitchen knife in my hand.

And—

“Eh…?”

I’m the one who instinctively gasped in surprise, not Otonashi-san.

She opened her eyes wide and stopped breathing just because I pointed the knife at her. I have never seen her look so defenseless.

Miyazaki-kun takes this opportunity to free himself from her arm lock, but she remains petrified.

I approach her with the knife, crouch down, and handcuff her. After she allows her hands to be restrained without resisting, she finally opens her mouth.

“What… does this mean, Kazuki?” she says falteringly.

“What is this… I don’t understand. Why did you point a knife at me…?”

“He betrayed you!” Miyazaki-kun explains in my stead.

“Betrayed me…? There’s no reason to do so. Kazuki cannot oppose the Sevennight in Mud without me. He would only betray me if he surrendered to you and gave up, but that’s impossible. Therefore he would never betray—”

“So that means Hoshino surrendered to us and gave up, doesn’t it?”

“He gave… up?”

I reflexively avert my eyes when she directs a pleading gaze toward me.

“Fu—”

Laughter leaks from Miyazaki-kun’s mouth.

“Fufu, ahahahahaha! What’s with this sad sight, Otonashi? Please stop already! I had a relatively high opinion of you when I was fighting against you, you know? But just how delicate are you, getting all shocked just because your lover betrayed you!? This is just plain disappointing!”

“Kazuki.”

Otonashi-san did not even deign to look at Miyazaki-kun, who is still laughing. Otonashi-san was gazing at me all this time.

“Is this true? Have you really surrendered to [Yuuhei Ishihara] like he says?”

“……I have!” I cry out.

When she hears this, Otonashi-san looks down, hiding her face, and starts to tremble.

“Whoa, wait a sec! Why are you trembling? Don’t tell me you started crying! Oi, oi, don’t overact! Honestly, stop it, this is just too hilarious!!”

Miyazaki-kun continues to laugh in response to her overreaction.

“Ah right, Otonashi. I’ll tell you something good! This guy is without doubt

[Kazuki Hoshino]. He’s not [Yuuhei Ishihara]. The guy that betrayed and handcuffed you is definitely [Kazuki Hoshino]!”

“……I know,” she answers, head hanging low.

“What?”

“I’m perfectly aware that he is [Kazuki Hoshino] and not someone else.”

Otonashi-san stands up, but she’s still looking downward. I still can’t see her face. She approaches me while swaying back and forth. I instinctively step backward because of her odd behavior; after all, she’s approaching me even though I’m holding a knife and she’s restrained by handcuffs. I step back even further and bump into the wall.

She pounds the wall above me with her still-restrained hands while I avert my eyes.

“Kazuki, did you really surrender to a bunch of people like them?” She says in a deep, monotone voice. I shrug my shoulders and peek carefully at her.

She slowly raises her head.

Ah, I see… she was trembling out of anger.

“You, the only person to defeat me since I became a box, surrendered to a halfhearted and weak group of people? Are you trying to insult me…? You want to tell me that I’m lower than that lame group of losers, huh…!”

Her initially suppressed voice steadily grows louder.

“Don’t mess around with me, honestly, don’t mess around with me! Don’t say such utter nonsense! There’s no way your will would be broken so easily by such a bunch of…!!”

She swings her restrained hands down again. I reflexively close my eyes. The wall clangs, and I hear a loud sound coming from above my head. I slowly open my eyes and find her snarling face, reddened in vexation, right in front of mine.

“O-oi! What’s wrong, Otonashi? Has the shock of his betrayal driven you insane?”

“You be quiet,” she spits out, gaze still fixed on me.

“…I felt that something was wrong since I got your call. But I was convinced that you’d never cooperate with them. That’s why I believed Miyazaki’s words. Yet, you’re acting like this… Shit! This is just bullshit!”

Otonashi-san looks down at my knife as if she’d just noticed it, and sneers even harder with an amazed expression on her face.

“…What’s with this kitchen knife? Will you stab me when I don’t obey you? Haha, very funny. Go ahead, stab me! I’m totally open. Come on! Come on come on! As if you could!”

“Uuh…”

I instinctively lower the knife.

“Say it. Why did you do it. —Say it!”

I hang my head and say, while grinding my teeth at my wretchedness, “Luu-cha—my sister was taken hostage. I had no other choice but to obey them.”

“Because of such a trifle…”

“This is not a trifle! Luu-chan is my sole—”

“You are a man who was prepared to transform the girl you loved into a squashed body.”

I hold my breath.

“Wait a sec, Otonashi!”

Otonashi-san unwillingly turns toward Miyazaki-kun.

“What? Can’t you see that we’re busy?”

“No, you see, shouldn’t you deny that he’s [Kazuki Hoshino] because of what he’s done to you? Why are you convinced that he’s [Kazuki Hoshino]?”

Right, Miyazaki-kun cannot ignore this. His goal from the very beginning was to make her mix up [Kazuki Hoshino] and [Yuuhei Ishihara].

“You say some strange things, you know? Kazuki is Kazuki of course. There’s no way this would change.”

“How on earth can you distinguish them!? …ah, I see. You’re just trying to rationalize his betrayal. Because you believed that the voice that appealed to you for help belonged to [Kazuki Hoshino], you’re maintaining your mistake so you don’t have to doubt him.”

“I knew that voice belonged to [Yuuhei Ishihara].”

Miyazaki-kun frowns.

“Don’t lie! Do you mean you recognized that it was a recording?”

“No.”

“So how on earth would you realize that it’s not [Kazuki Hoshino]!?”

“Of course I would realize that.”

She speaks as if she’s just stating a fact.

“Kazuki would never call me ‘Aya’ when seeking my help.”

“—Ah.”

I remember.

I remember the name I called out in the music room when everyone else abandoned me, after Daiya pinned me down and hit me.

She’s exactly right! I could never call her ‘Aya’ when seriously seeking help. I mean, that’s the name of the person I once fought against.

“…So tell me, why did you come to save him?”

“If you were telling the truth, saving [Yuuhei Ishihara] would be equivalent to saving Kazuki.”

“…Wait a sec. Wouldn’t that imply that you’re treating Kazuki Hoshino as [Yuuhei Ishihara] right now?”

“Well, I did initially. But I knew that he’s actually [Kazuki Hoshino] after a single glance.”

“……Oi, oi! You’re totally lying now. In fact, you weren’t able to distinguish them until now!”

“My only issue had to do with the timing of the shift. I just need to observe the movements of his facial muscles for about three seconds to see the difference. I can now recognize Kazuki as Kazuki.”

She can recognize that I’m me?

Even though no one else could?

“…Such a thing is impossible! Don’t fuck with me!”

“You’re not totally wrong. If it were anyone but Kazuki, I’d probably be unable to distinguish them. But for Kazuki alone, it is indeed possible.”

“Why?!”

She then says—

“Because I have been together with Kazuki longer than anyone else in the entire world.”

The words I had grown familiar with, somewhere, at some point.

“Ah—”

A sound involuntarily escapes from my throat. I put my hand on her shoulder. She turns around to face me in astonishment.

Seeing me act this way, Miyazaki-kun frowns and says:

“What’s the matter, Hoshino? You aren’t going to remove her handcuffs just because of this clichéd nonsense, right? You know what will happen to your sister if you do, right?”

For some reason, his threat no longer works on me anymore.

“Umm, Otonashi-san.”

If I say it, I won’t be able to turn back anymore. But I have already made my decision, even though I wavered before.

“Let me touch your box.”

The astonishment fades from her face.

“You don’t even need to ask. I couldn’t hinder you even if I wanted to because of these handcuffs.”

She says this despite having pounded her hands against the wall without fear of a knife.

She continues speaking with a slightly embarrassed smile.

“…you just have to touch it arbitrarily.”

She bluntly gives me permission to do so.

I nod lightly and press my open palm against her chest.

“—Ah.”

I sink to the bottom of the sea. This is the second time I’m here. It’s an unchanging scene in which everyone seems happy. However, it’s just a lie that everyone here is happy. A single person is crying, surrounded by happy people. It’s someone who knows that this bliss is just a lie and cannot join them in their laughter. I have heard this person crying before.

It’s grueling.

There’s no oxygen, so I cannot stay here forever.

Is that why it’s grueling?

Or is it because I know that I can’t cure her pain?

Because I know that I cannot do anything to combat her utter solitude?

I feel tears run down my cheeks, just like I did within a certain box once before.

“—I’m sorry.”

I recall everything about her.

Why did I think she was merely using me as bait for O? Why did I think she was just making light of my everyday life?

There’s no way she—who puts everyone else first—would do anything like that.

She believed that I would be able to fight against the Sevennight in Mud even if alone. That’s why she didn’t seek to contact me after I rejected her.

But I was unable to believe in her and… betrayed her.

“I’m sorry.”

I said it again. She averts her eyes, seeming to feel somewhat awkward.

“…No, I might have not considered things thoroughly enough. I had unreasonably high hopes for you, without considering that you forgot so much of what happened inside the Rejecting Classroom… maybe. ……Umm, I just realized this, so please forgive me.”

I shake my head. She sneaks a peek at me via a side-glance.

“I’ll tell you something I didn’t tell you before because I thought you’d grasp it on your own. Kazuki, your everyday life won’t return. However—”

She glances at me head-on, relaxes the corners of her mouth slightly and says:

“—We can regain your everyday life.”

Aah—

With those words, I won’t ever get confused about my place in life again.

I am… me.

I am—Kazuki Hoshino.

I take the keys out from my pocket. I insert them into the lock on her handcuffs.

“…what are you doing, Hoshino!? You’re abandoning your sister’s life just to be fancied by your lover?! You really are horrible…”

“No. It’s true that I made my decision. But it’s not like I abandoned my older sister.”

“So what? If you don’t obey me, Luka Hoshino is going to get killed!”

“She won’t.”

“How can you say that?!”

“It’s simple.”

This isn’t some sort of bluff; I’m just announcing my intentions.

“Because I won’t let you.”

I don’t need to obey them anymore. I don’t need to restrict myself to the choices they prepared for me.

Because I can’t lose anymore, now that she has become my ally.

I made the decision to entrust everything to her.

I turn the keys. The handcuffs open and fall to the ground. I grasp her newly freed hands. She looks at me, and I look back at her.

“Please, lend me a hand—”

I won’t make that mistake again.

I won’t call her by the wrong name anymore.

“—Maria.”

When I say that, she—really, just for a split second—

She smiles, innocently, like a normal girl her age.

“There are conditions.”

She speaks in her usual, dignified tone once more.

“Saying this explicitly may be unnecessary. I believe that you will fulfill this condition anyway. However, I, too, can feel anxiety and it really hurt me. So please let me say it.”

I nod lightly, without knowing what she intends to say

“I won’t lose sight of you. So, please. You, too,—”

Maria briefly averts her gaze. Then she looks at me once more and clearly says:

“—don’t lose sight of me anymore.”

Aah… I see.

I didn’t notice at all until now.

I isolated myself pointlessly, but I wasn't the only one who had to suffer as a result. I also left Maria all alone and made her suffer.

Ever since the Rejecting Classroom, Maria was always [Aya Otonashi]. She is trying to be her box itself. Her real self, [Maria Otonashi], is nowhere to be found.

"I am Aya Otonashi. Pleased to meet you."

"But I am not strong."

I recall the one time when she faintly lamented her fate.

Right, I am the only one who can call her 'Maria', because I am the only one who truly bore witness to her first school transfer.

If I forget, [Maria Otonashi] will truly be forgotten by everyone—probably even by herself—and vanish.

"Stop it already!"

Upon hearing his voice, I let go of Maria's hand.

"Isn't this ridiculous? Whether you collude or not, it doesn't change anything! Kazuki Hoshino will be taken over and his sister Luka, will be killed. Or do you perhaps think you could just prance off into your imaginary world?"

Miyazaki-kun sneers at us.

"You cannot win! After all, [Yuuhei Ishihara] has killed himself. You can't possibly find a dead guy! Of course, you can't destroy the box either. How will you solve this problem? Come on, tell me!"

He is… right.

The *owner*, Miyazaki-kun's younger brother, isn't here anymore. We can't do anything in the face of this fact.

"……I know already who [Yuuhei Ishihara] really is."

After hearing Maria's words, Miyazaki-kun opens his eyes wide for a second, but then he sees her depressed expression and smirks instead.

"So? Did you find him?"

"…No. I searched all day long, but didn't find him."

"Fufu, well, that's understandable. You can't possibly find a dead person after all!" Miyazaki-kun proclaims triumphantly.

……Oh?

What is this strange feeling? I feel like something's terribly wrong with Miyazaki-kun's delight. What…?

"It's too late—got it? I can't protect the person I want to protect anymore."

That's what he said. He's helping to complete the Sevennight in Mud because it's the only way to protect "himself." Because his 'younger brother' who was of utmost importance to him had died.

I see.

"—That's a lie."

When I murmur this, Miyazaki-kun turns around to me right away.

"You said that he's dead, but that's a lie. It's obvious if you think about it. You'd never do such a thing, nor would you allow it."

"……What are you babbling about, Hoshino? Don't try to twist my words in your favor!"

"He was important to you, wasn't he?"

Miyazaki-kun frowns in response to this unexpected question, but he acknowledges it.

"Yeah."

"So you would never laugh about his death, right?"

Of course, I just thought that his laughter was unnatural, so it doesn't really count as evidence. Hence, if Miyazaki-kun evades my question with composure, he could deceive me once more.

But—

"Therefore, he's not dead yet, is he?"

But Miyazaki-kun cannot counter my question. He lets his head hang low.

"A lie yields hope when you realize that it's a lie."

I recite this line that he once said to me. I continue speaking once he raises his head.

"You were right."

He opens his eyes wide and opens his mouth. I look silently at him, but he clenches his fist, grinds his teeth and scowls at me.

"—Sh…it…!"

However, he's unable to do anything and drops his gaze.

He starts walking unsteadily past us. He stretches his hands out toward the desk and picks up the cell phone.

He wordlessly uses the phone, presses it against his ear and listens to something.

“I didn’t make it in time.”

It’s a murmur that sounds as if he were speaking to himself.

“I didn’t make it in time. I was taking a bath when he called me. Thus, it was already too late when I noticed this voicemail.”

I guess he’s listening to that voicemail.

“I should have been able to save him before it happened. If I had noticed his pain earlier, I could have averted it. And yet, I was intoxicated by my own unhappiness and failed to hear his scream for help, although he was supposed to be my most important person. This is the outcome.”

As he says this, he opens the top drawer of the desk.

“I know it’s already too late. I know I can’t make it in time anymore. But you know what? He’s still screaming! I don’t want to… hear this scream anymore.”

He inserts his hand into the drawer.

“I will stop his tears. I’ll bear any sin and any punishment to do that. I have that much resolve! If you have any complaints, just voice them now!!”

“Of course we have some,” Maria declares.

“You stopped thinking. You haven’t chosen anything. You’re just trying to cover your ears because you don’t want to hear this scream. You’re just reveling in the pain of fighting meaninglessly against us.”

She dropped her gaze briefly, but then spits out her next few words: “You cannot revoke the past by doing this.”

“……So, what?” He hangs his head and whispers. “Can you undo this outcome overflowing with corpses? That’s not possible. I cannot create a bright future, no matter how hard I struggle. So I want to at least grant him what he wishes for. That’s all. So—”

He takes his hand out of the drawer.

“—let yourself be obediently imprisoned already!”

He takes out a stun gun and rushes toward Maria.

“Maria!!”

Maria grabs his outstretched right hand quickly and twists it. Miyazaki-kun cries out faintly and drops the stun gun.

“Ugh—”

I pick up the stun gun. Maria is able to restrain him, but she won’t use any more violence than necessary. Therefore, it’s my turn.

I accept his scowl without averting my eyes. I won’t back off. If he directs his enmity at me, I have to follow suit.

“Sorry.”

I press the stun gun against his neck.

Miyazaki-kun moans and collapses right away.

“…Kazuki, let’s leave this room.”

“Okay.”

But just before I’m about to leave the room, something grabs my right leg.

“—!”

I hurriedly turn around. Miyazaki-kun has grabbed my right leg from his collapsed state, but with so little strength that I could easily shake him off.

He raises his head.

“……Sorry.”

What…?

“Sorry for not making it in time. I’m sorry that I wasn’t able to save you in time. I’ll get stronger… I’ll get stronger for both of us… so please, give me just one more chance…!”

Aah, no.

This terribly powerful entreaty isn’t directed at me.

I bite my lip and lift my right leg. It’s easy to shake off his hand.

Then I press the stun gun against Miyazaki-kun’s back.

“……You have no hope anymore.”

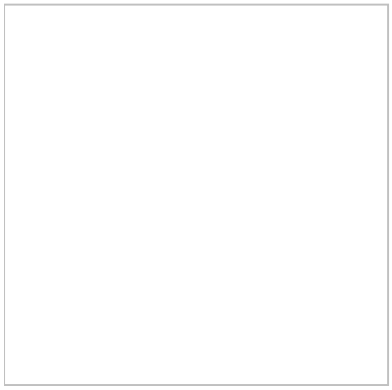
Because I’m going to destroy this wish.

I turn on the stun gun. His head falls silently and stops moving.

—Sorry.

I’m sure he meant to say it to [him].

But maybe, this apology was also directed at [me]… I suddenly think.



I step over Miyazaki-kun and picked up his cell phone.

“Kazuki, what are you doing?”

I play the voice-mail.

“…save… me….. Please, Nii-san, save me….!”

And I finally grasp [Yuuhei Ishihara]‘s identity.

1. ↑ Kesa-Gatame (袈裟固?) is one of the seven mat holds, Osaekomi-waza, of Kodokan Judo. In grappling terms, it is categorized as a side control hold. See Wikipedia for more details.

May 4th

みどりの日
5月4日(月)
こどもの日
5月5日(火)

May 4th (Monday) 07:49

I notice that I'm lying on the floor on top of a futon. I've been restrained with handcuffs and footcuffs. I'm still dazed and confused.

The anguish I feel is indistinguishable from dream or reality.

I feel like I'm sinking into a bottomless swamp.

I struggle and struggle to no avail, sink deeper and deeper, and in the end forget why I'm even struggling. I even lose my ability to struggle. I just sink deeper into the mud. My body gets filled with mud. I turn into mud. My inside and my outside are all just mud now. I lose all sense of my own shape since I've completely faded.

I cannot see myself anymore.

……I, huh.

[TL Note: Japanese has several ways to say 'I'. He's referring to 'Boku']

When I first entered this body, I deliberately referred to myself like this, but by now I do so completely naturally. I don't think I'm getting used to it, so much as my mind is getting dragged along by Kazuki Hoshino's body.

That's why I'm able to believe that I can become Kazuki Hoshino—because this body is transforming how I think.

I finally wake and sit up. I recognize where I am because of the peppermint fragrance. It's not where I should be—Ryuu Miyazaki's apartment—but rather, Maria Otonashi's room.

I hear the weak breathing of someone sleeping. I look toward the bed and see that Maria Otonashi is turned toward me. For once, her expression isn't strained. Her face looks like that of a sleeping girl my age….Wait a sec, she's actually the same age as I am.

"Why are you staring at me?"

Her innocent expression instantly disappears.

"You look cute when you sleep, Otonashi-san."

"So you're [Yuuhei Ishihara]."

She saw through me right away, even though the stretch of time between 07:00 and 08:00 belonged to [Kazuki Hoshino] until yesterday.

Maria Otonashi raises her upper body and peeks into my eyes.

“I’m afraid you’re alive.”

“……Hah?”

I don’t know how to react to such a non sequitur.

“I’m telling you that the owner is still alive.”

I still can’t immediately understand what she’s saying. But I slowly realize that she just made an outrageous statement.

What on earth…?

I still have trouble following along and just stare at Maria Otonashi’s face. She looks scornfully at my dumbfounded face, and stands up.

“Well, I think it’s time to go. I don’t have time for idle chit-chat.”

She takes a jacket out of the closet and puts it on.

“Where are you going…?”

“How foolish. I’m going to search for the owner. What else would I be doing?”

If the owner is alive, then this is a reasonable response. She opens the door and leaves without a second glance.

Huh? What does this mean? What on earth happened?

Did our strategy yesterday fail? How else could I end up in this situation?

I need to figure out what happened.

I search for my cell phone in order to call Ryuu Miyazaki. I see Kazuki Hoshino’s cell phone lying on the table. As I reach out for it—

“—!”

The cell phone suddenly rings—the timing is so inopportune that I cringe in fear.

The clock indicates that it just turned 8:00AM. 8:00AM has been my time since yesterday. Surely, Ryuu Miyazaki waited to make a call right after my time started.

I pick up the phone and look at the caller ID.

“……Eh?”

It's not the number I expected. This number is surely… —No, this can't be! That person would never call me!

But then, who is it?

My fingers are trembling faintly, but I ignore them and press the Talk button.

"…..Hello?"

"……"

The caller remains silent.

"Hello? …Who is it?"

"Riko Asami."

"Wha—"

I'm speechless.

"Why are you so surprised?"

"Y-You—"

"Did you think I was dead? Did you think I was murdered? Bad luck, huh. We're having a conversation now.

It's definitely Riko Asami's voice.

"This is impossible! You can't be alive! Ryuu Miyazaki should have killed you!"

"…hu, huhu, I already know this, but you can only see yourself. How foolish. Don't you get it? That person would never be able to kill me.

Ryuu Miyazaki cannot kill Riko Asami? …I can't believe it. Riko Asami should be an eyesore for Ryuu Miyazaki as well.

"You're a fool to consider killing someone without getting your own hands dirty. You're a piece of trash that no one can look at. Why can't you burn in an incinerator like trash is supposed to?"

Riko Asami took advantage of my confusion to mock me.

I finally accept the fact that she's not dead and notice something.

"…why are you speaking that way?"

"The way I speak?"

"You're speaking almost like—"

"Almost like I did in the past? Like I did before starting to pretend to be tough? Like when I was all morbid and able to just endure? …I'm surprised

you can say that…”

Riko Asami laughs dryly and continues.

“…When you haven’t changed yourself.”

She says I haven’t changed? Even though I’ve worked so hard all the time? I, who admired Maria Otonashi and recreated myself? The one who is going to become Kazuki Hoshino? …I haven’t changed!?

Don’t screw with me! Especially since you’re just Riko Asami!

“…Don’t mess with me! Did you just call to pester me or something?”

Upon perceiving my enmity, she, who used to be so timid, says:

“Yes!

“…Eh?”

“You know? I can’t forgive someone like you who’s trying to take over someone else’s body. …Honestly, what the hell? You should know your place. You ought to drop dead. Therefore—”

Riko Asami says emotionlessly.

“—I think I’ll crush this box.”

“What… are you saying…?”

“You know I’m able to, right? After all, I, Riko Asami, am the owner.”

I’m speechless; unable to talk back to her, I stay silent. My hands are trembling.

Riko Asami giggles silently and says to me.

[TL Note: Now ‘Atashi’ was used as ‘I’. This is used by girls.]

“Don’t even think about getting saved alone! Okay, [Riko Asami]-san?”

[TL Note: You got it. The owner’s Riko Asami. However, in the story she was always referred to with ‘he’. That is because it wasn’t possible to address her neutrally in English.]

May 4th (Monday) 10:01

“…save… me….. Please, Nii-san, save me….!”

That scream for help came from Riko Asami.

Come to think of it, Miyazaki-kun mentioned ‘siblings’, but never said ‘younger brother’. I assumed she was a boy because she spoke with my (male) voice and also called herself ‘Yuuhei Ishihara’. Miyazaki-kun naturally wouldn’t correct me, I guess.

But I never would have imagined that Asami-san was Miyazaki-kun’s younger sister. After all, they have different last names, and I have never heard any rumors about such a relationship. Despite visiting our classroom every day, she didn’t give anything away. I suppose they were deliberately concealing their sibling relationship because of their messed up family situation.

Perhaps she came to our classroom to see Miyazaki-kun, in addition to seeing Maria.

I ask Maria, who had returned before I switched back to [me], as she removes my handcuffs: “Since when did you know [Yuuhei Ishihara] was a girl?”

“Mh, I had a strong suspicion that [Yuuhei Ishihara] might be a girl when we entered the girl’s bathroom together.”

“……so [Riko Asami] entered the girl’s bathroom using my body, right?”

“Why do you need to ask such an obvious question,” she says in amazement. …Um, shouldn’t I be the one amazed by you?

“I grasped her true identity after doing some more research. Most of Miyazaki’s prior classmates during his middle school time knew of his blood relationship with Asami. I then discovered the corpses at her home and became confident that Riko Asami was the owner.”

Maria saw those corpses, too…

She finishes removing my handcuffs and sighs.

“But just where is she…?”

Maria tells me that she had been searching for Asami-san after independently

discovering that Asami-san's the owner, but she could find any trace of Asami-san.

Maria crouches down, looks for something under the bed and tears something off.

"What are you doing?"

"I installed an IC-Recorder under the bed. I thought that Miyazaki or someone might call her and leak something we don't know yet."

Maria presses the play button on the recorder. She searchs for [Riko Asami]'s comments by repeatedly pressing the 'fast forward' button.

"……hello?"

Her voice makes a loud sound

"…she made a phone call!"

"Yeah."

The voice of the other party was almost inaudible, but it seemed like a girl's voice. At the very least, it wasn't Miyazaki-kun.

I tried checking my cell phone history. I guess the call log has been cleared, since there aren't any new entries.

It seems as if they were quarreling.

Maria connects the recorder to her notebook, downloads the sound file and starts listening to it over headphones. I guess she's trying to hear all the details.

Maria frowns so hard it almost scares me.

After a while, she holds out the headphones. I nod and put them on.

"Hello? …Who is it?"

"Riko Asami."

I start to doubt my own ears.

I listen for a while, but have more and more doubts. Is this really Asami-san? She's not speaking like the Asami-san I know. Asami-san doesn't usually speak in such a calm and subdued fashion. The personality of the Riko Asami I know is the same as the one of [Yuuhei Ishihara]—no, [Riko Asami].

But that reminds me, Asami-san started acting strange since April 30th. Right, she somehow gave off dismal vibes. So her odd attitude wasn't necessarily the result of Maria making me a boxed lunch. Come to think of it, the

Sevennight in Mud had already started at that time.

Asami-san acted like her former self. —Why?

“Don’t think about getting saved alone! Okay, [Riko Asami]-san?”

I perk up my ears and focus on the rest of their conversation.

May 4th (Monday) 11:02

I recall my phone conversation with Riko Asami.

“Don’t think about getting saved alone! Okay, [Riko Asami]-san?”

I flinched for a moment from her ill-will, but pulled myself together and objected.

“…And how do you plan to take the box out? Do you know how to, or what?”

“I don’t know. But I’m still able to destroy it.”

I lost my ability to speak when I heard how plainly she said that.

“I want to escape. I also want to erase you because I hate you. I’m able to do both at the same time. You know what I mean, don’t you? For this method I just need—”

Riko Asami says, in her barely perceptible voice.

“—to commit suicide before the box is completed.”

I had already heard those words before.

Aah, I see. Those were the same words I once sent to Kazuki Hoshino.

“Don’t tell me you really thought you could take over Kazuki Hoshino’s body? I’m so sorry, but that’s impossible! It’s impossible that you could ever win against someone, that you could ever attain happiness! After all you are me. Riko Asami. You should know your place. You should die. Someone like you should definitely die.”

Like Riko Asami used to, she cursed with a small voice that was almost imperceptible.

“You ought to die by hanging that would cause you to void your bowels so everyone would need to hold their nose. You ought to die by jumping off a roof so you would bother passers-by with your scattered-about brains. You ought to die by jumping in front of a train, annoying the passengers by splashing your innards all over the platform… that would suit you. Tell me, what do you think?”

Riko Asami asked me.

“Which manner of death would you like for Riko Asami?”

She asked me to determine her own method of suicide.

I understood. When the owner, Riko Asami, dies, I would inevitably vanish.

I was completely cornered.

“……Stop it!”

I conveyed my panic with those short words, which caused Riko Asami to rejoice.

“What should I stop? My plans to kill myself? Why? Didn’t you try to kill me?”

“T-That was because… I hadn’t noticed that I would vanish if you died.”

“Hihaha, don’t be silly! Did you think you haven’t vanished yet? Brilliant. This is just too brilliant. …did you perhaps seriously think you could become Kazuki Hoshino?”

“I can! If you don’t hinder me, I can become Kazuki Hoshino! And then I will steal his happiness!”

“Aha. It doesn’t matter, though. After all I’ll commit suicide anyway.”

“Didn’t I tell you to stop it!?”

“Why should I listen to you? I’m your enemy, you know?”

“Enemy?”

“Yes, enemy. You should know that your self, especially your former self, is your enemy.”

“Stop joking with me! Though I could become Kazuki Hoshino if it weren’t for you, why are you doing this?! Horrible! You really are horrible!”

Upon hearing those words, Riko Asami started to giggle joyfully.

“What’s so funny?!”

“‘Horrible,’ huh!”

Riko Asami spoke while giggling.

“Don’t overdo the self-loathing, okay?”

That was my conversation with Riko Asami.

“Uh, ghu—”

I hold my chest in response to the nausea that wells up.

Gross. Why, why… Why did I have to talk with Riko Asami…? Ryuu Miyazaki told me he had killed her, so was he lying to me?

"……I'll get killed."

This was no ideal threat. I know that because I know Riko Asami better than anyone else does. She hates herself more than anyone else, and would never accept the completion of this box.

She will probably crush the box on the night of May 5th.

Because she wants to wear me out by making me wait right down to the wire.

To avert this, we had to kill Riko Asami. …But even if Ryuu Miyazaki had killed her, I would have vanished because of the destruction of the box.

So what? Does this mean I'm destined to vanish, no matter how hard I try to fight back?

"……What should—"

I'm cornered. I'm trapped by Maria Otonashi, cannot make contact with Ryuu Miyazaki, and am about to get erased by Riko Asami.

Why did it turn out like this…! The gradual takeover was originally intended to corner Kazuki Hoshino!

"What should I do—"

……Wait a moment. I recall my own mutterings. What did I just say?

I?

[TL Note: She got, as mentioned above, used to calling herself "Boku". But now Riko just called herself "Atashi" which is used mainly by women.]

Didn't I stop talking about myself this way when I started taking over this body? Didn't I naturally stop using that construction?

Don't tell me I started being self-aware?

Self-aware of being 'Riko Asami'?

No, nonononononono! I am not 'Riko Asami'! I am no one, a fabrication, that will eventually become Kazuki Hoshino—

"To think you could escape from your own deed just by doing this; I find this childish side of you terribly adorable."

What is this voice?

A terribly charming voice I had already heard once before, enters my body.

No. That’s not true. I can—escape from Riko Asami.

And still,

“Ah,
AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHH”

A flood of memories enters my mind all at once. Memories that should have been forgotten when I entered this body spring to mind. Though I can’t process them all at once, they unavoidably push into my consciousness.

What I see is the scene of the first time Yuuhei Ishihara used violence against Riko Asami.

The 13-aged Riko Asami was bawling, frightened of this brute with a crimson face.

Aah, yes. That’s how it started. His first act of violence was in response to Riko Asami’s anger. The 13-aged Riko Asami hated him because he wasn’t her real father, considered him an enemy, so she expressed her ill will. Yuuhei Ishihara couldn’t bear this in the end, and thus struck out against her.

This was the trigger for an everyday life filled with violence. Well, that was probably because the undesired problem child became silent and obedient when violence was used. So violence against Riko Asami became an effective and pleasant method for that brute.

It was equally agreeable for the mother who was greatly embarrassed by Riko Asami’s temper. Riko Asami had been trying to destroy this family, and thus had gotten out of control. This was a problem that had bothered that old bat the whole time.

Morals evolve in response to the surrounding environment. Riko Asami’s opposition to the violence and her family slowly started to disappear. Everyone, including Riko Asami herself, stopped questioning this violence.

They stopped questioning the violence, but this didn’t change the fact that Riko Asami’s heart continued to be torn up.

Riko Asami heard the sound of her heart being ripped up a countless number of times. This was not a powerful sound, but a modest one—as if someone threw a small stone into a pond. At first she only thought “Aah, it tore up again” when she had heard this sound, but after a while she noticed that she lacked something important.

This man’s violence was inferior to that of a true brute, and was so common

as to be of little interest to any outsiders. It would get described as “ill-treatment” or some other simple word. This single word would probably give one the feeling of comprehension.

Therefore, Riko Asami did not identify this as violence.

The gaps within Riko Asami’s broken heart were closed by violence. This meant that Riko Asami would accept this violence when she stopped hating herself.

Hence, Riko Asami doesn’t admit her own existence.

The next thing I saw was a scene from our high school entrance ceremony.

Maria Otonashi—who stood at the platform as the top student.

Riko Asami saw her and drowned. Just by looking at Maria Otonashi and hearing her voice, Riko Asami became unable to breathe and crouched down painfully.

This is a thing.

The ultimate tool.

She looked like some master craftsman’s life work. She possessed so much direction and intent, she seemed like a work of art. She was that absurd an existence.

Riko Asami started to cry without noticing.

This is it. This is what she needed to escape from herself. She needed to make a perfect fake self, as Maria Otonashi had.

Riko Asami started to cut herself loose. She threw her gloomy self away and created a neutral and strong self. But she didn’t do so as well as Maria Otonashi had. The more Riko Asami came to know her, the more she realized that it would not be possible to imitate her. Maria Otonashi was able to create a perfect self because she’s an exceptional being. No one else would ever be able to imitate that feat.

Maria Otonashi is definitely—not human.

At last I saw the scene from ‘April 28th’.

The day Riko Asami obtained the box.

Riko Asami was holding a worn-out plush bunny in her hands. Blood had been splashed on this plush toy that was missing an ear. Once upon a time, her brother had won that toy for her from a crane game.

There were two corpses.

Her brother was caught in a puddle of red liquid and screaming.

Riko Asami was completely broken by Yuuhei Ishihara.

There was nothing in this house that was not broken.

Everything had ended. Everything of Riko Asami's had been trampled down, and had been destroyed once and for all.

I was crying.

The illusion disappeared finally, washed away by my tears.

"……something, something like this…"

I must not admit this. I absolutely must not admit to being Riko Asami!

—therefore, I will become Kazuki Hoshino.

I won't forgive [Kazuki Hoshino]. I won't forgive him, someone who blathers about everyday life being happiness, and all the people who don't even realize that they can only laugh because they're stealing someone else's happiness.

I'll have the last laugh. I'll inflict it upon [Kazuki Hoshino], who doesn't even try to comprehend my misfortune.

I'll use you. Maria Otonashi doesn't mix me and [Kazuki Hoshino] up anymore. So I cannot deceive her anymore. So I just need to use the original one. I'll threaten [Kazuki Hoshino], make him obey me and deceive her.

He shall call forth his own ruin and fall into despair. He shall become unable to call everyday life happiness.

I take Kazuki Hoshino's phone and make a voice recording.

"[Kazuki Hoshino], I'll kill your entire family. I'll massacre them brutally. I'll cut them up and kill them so brutally that you won't be able to recognize the corpses anymore. So you better do what I say. If you do, I'll spare them depending on my mood. Absolutely don't allow Maria Otonashi to hear this message. Okay then, these are my instructions—"

May 4th (Monday) 12:06

“—I’ll kill you. And then I’ll become Kazuki Hoshino. And again, don’t say anything to Maria Otonashi!”

Having heard this, Maria murmurs “…how foolish” and frowns.

“After getting cornered, she completely lost track of her position. There’s no way I wouldn’t listen to this message in such a situation.”

Various insults and “Deceive Maria Otonashi and slip out of captivity!” are in the voice file.

I’m not frightened by her threats. No matter how hard [Riko Asami] tries to push me, now that we’re working together, it’s impossible for her to commit murder with this body.

Her attitude is just pitiable.

Maria, whose lips are pursed, surely holds the same opinion.

Maria had researched Riko Asami’s background yesterday and the day before yesterday. While mostly just rumors, what she heard still sounded awful.

Furthermore—those corpses, mistakes that cannot be undone, do in fact exist.

As long she doesn’t complete the Sevennight in Mud, a hopeless future awaits ‘Asami-san’.

That’s why she cannot bear it anymore.

“……Oh?”

“Why are you suddenly making a dumb sound?”

“No, I was just a little confused. Uum, Asami-san and [Riko Asami] spoke with each other, which means both of them exist separately, right? …Is that even possible?”

“This just means that Asami had some degree of common-sense. She was trying to take over your body, but could not fully believe that that could happen. That’s why things are as they are.”

“…So, the ‘Asami-san’ that’s the owner is the real one…?”

“It’s not about real and fake. But ‘Asami’ continued to suffer even when [Riko Asami] was brought forth by the Sevennight in Mud.”

‘Asami-san’ could not escape even after obtaining the Sevennight in Mud. Since she was abandoned, she’s planning to commit suicide—taking [Riko Asami] with her.

“We absolutely must prevent her suicide. That’s another reason to find Asami. But where on earth is she? …Damn it, there’s only one day left!”

Maria is obviously nervous.

Maria puts everyone else first. Asami-san dies and the Sevennight in Mud ends—she cannot allow an outcome like that.

“……Maria, how about using this threat?”

Maria frowns and looks at me.

“What do you mean?”

“…Ah well, I just had an idea. I was thinking that things might progress if we purposefully respond to the threat and let [Riko Asami] act…”

“Sure enough, we might be stuck otherwise.”

Maria crosses her arms while pondering our options.

“Let’s assume that we respond to the threat and set [Riko Asami] free. Then… right, I suppose she would visit Ryuu Miyazaki.”

“Yeah, I think so, too.”

“—Wait. Maybe Miyazaki knows about Asami’s whereabouts anyway?”

“…I don’t think so. If he knew, he would never support completing the Sevennight in Mud.”

“You have a point… but then again, he told us that we will never find Asami. So that statement would lose its basis. …Did Miyazaki misunderstand anything…?”

Maria frowns and ponders some more.

“…It doesn’t help to think about it. For now, let’s just assume that Miyazaki doesn’t know about Asami’s present condition.”

I nodded.

“But is there any point to letting [Riko Asami] act on her own? We don’t need [Riko Asami], you know—we need the Asami who’s the owner, right?”

“…err, I think there is a point. Based on what we heard through the IC-

Recorder, I think [Riko Asami] knows how to reach ‘Asami-san’.”

“Cooperate with [Riko Asami] and let them come into contact, huh? That’s impossible. It’s hardly believable that a girl who makes such threats would live up to your expectations.”

…That’s certainly true.

“Or do you plan to break her heart, cause her to surrender and make her obey you forcefully?” Maria laughs faintly and says this in a joking fashion.

My response to her joke: “Good idea.”

Her expression stiffens up.

But I’m equally surprised by the coldness of my words.

Setting that aside, I came up with an idea. Since I’m in a similar situation as [Riko Asami], I managed to hit upon a method to break her heart and make her obey us.

If we let [Riko Asami] go, she will contact Miyazaki-kun. Her relationship with Miyazaki-kun is like the one I have with Maria.

Therefore—

“We just need to make Ryuu Miyazaki betray [Riko Asami].”

While I say that, I wonder: Can I really do it?

Involving Miyazaki-kun, making [Riko Asami] fall into despair and destroying the Sevennight in Mud. This means that Asami-san is going to return to her original state, the one that caused an outcome that cannot be averted anymore. I don’t think any future happiness awaits her there. What I’m about to do requires sacrificing Asami-san.

…I’ll stop pretending to be a good person by acting as if it’s a hard decision to make.

In fact, I already made my decision long ago. I decided back when I announced ‘I won’t permit your existence.’ to her, when I started perceiving her as an enemy.

“I will defeat [Riko Asami].” “I won’t admit her.”

I’ve gained my determination, but Maria is looking at me with mixed feelings.

“I—”

“……Can you not support me?”

“That’s… not it. I know it can’t be helped because you would disappear otherwise. However, even so, I cannot accept the inevitable misfortune that awaits Asami,” she says and bites her lips.

“Because you can’t permit another’s misfortune…”

“…That’s not all. If that was it, I still might be able to endure it. But you know? I noticed…” she says, while looking down at the ground.

“I noticed that [Riko Asami] and [Aya Otonashi] are the same.”

“…the same?”

“……”

Maria doesn’t respond to my parroted question.

But I understand thanks to her silence.

Maria, who is trying to be a box, is still [Aya Otonashi], and [Riko Asami], who was created by a box, are similar in that both of them are separated from their original self.

Maria, who says that she’s in the same position, knows Asami-san’s feelings all too well.

I don’t know what’s best. I can only tell the silent Maria what I understand.

“But Asami-san isn’t wishing for that,” I continue. “She doesn’t wish for herself to disappear!”

“……Yeah, I know,” Maria murmurs and raises her head.

But even so, we cannot change Asami-san’s future.

May 4th (Monday) 12:35

I stand in front of Miyazaki-kun's room and take a deep breath.

Maria has already slipped into the room next door. She confirmed that it was unoccupied last time.

I breathe out and ring the chime to Miyazaki-kun's room.

There was no reaction. That's to be expected, though.

But I'm sure.

That Miyazaki-kun is in there.

"Come out."

I knock on the door.

"Come out, please come out—"

What I'm going to do will hurt him terribly. I realize that, but continue anyway.

"Please come out—Nii-san"

I address Miyazaki-kun like Riko Asami did over the phone.

"Save me, Nii-san!"

Miyazaki-kun was probably planning to spend his time until May 6th secluded in his room without contacting [Riko Asami].

But I'm sure he can't ignore [Riko Asami] when she directly seeks his help.

The door opens.

Miyazaki-kun lookes even worse than he did yesterday.

"……Is Otonashi nearby?"

"No."

"…What did you do until now?"

"Maria Otonashi caught me… But I was able to deceive [Kazuki Hoshino] and slip away! However, why did you not answer my phone, Nii-san?"

“—Well… …Anyway! Why are you calling me ‘Nii-san’? Didn’t you stop that?”

“Err…”

Asami-san called him ‘Nii-san’ in that earlier phone call, so did she stop doing that?

I suppress my burgeoning nervousness and quickly counter with a random explanation off the top of my head.

“I thought it may be weird to not call you ‘Nii-san’ though Maria Otonashi is calling me ‘Riko Asami’ by now… Leaving that aside, why did I get caught, Nii-san? What should I do now?”

I ask him a question before he could doubt my explanation. Miyazaki-kun kept silent in response and bites his lips.

His expression convinces me that Miyazaki-kun believes that I’m [Riko Asami].

“Will you save me, Nii-san?”

Of course I don’t want to drown Miyazaki-kun in bitterness.

I want him to say that he won’t save [Riko Asami] anymore. I want him to say that he will help us. That way I won’t have to torment him anymore.

Still, Miyazaki-kun smiles stiffly at me and says: “Yeah, I will save you!”

I proceed to the next step.

“Save me? Could you please stop that?”

Unable to grasp the situation, those words cause his eyes to open wide.

“……Huh?”

“I’m telling you to stop saving [Riko Asami]!”

He still doesn’t grasp the situation and stands completely still.

Thus, I clear things up for him.

“I am [Kazuki Hoshino].”

“Hoshino…?” he murmurs. He stays dumbfounded for a while, but at last he notices that [Kazuki Hoshino] is imitating [Riko Asami] and seizes me by the collar with wild anger flashing in his eyes.

“What are you up to, you bastard?! Is it fun to tease me?! Do you know just how repugnant you’re acting, HUH?!”

“I know…”

“So what is this?! Try explaining yourself!”

I start wavering before opening my mouth, because the words I’m going to say will definitely hurt him.

“Miyazaki-kun, it’s just that you try to help [Riko Asami] instinctively when she seeks help. Maria told you, didn’t she? You haven’t chosen anything.”

The sharpness remains in his eyes, but his grip on my collar weakens slightly.

“……Didn’t I tell you? I’m just saving my sister.”

“You were about to save her again right now after all. But it wasn’t your sister, it was me who was seeking help, you know?”

After he hears those words, his eyes open wide.

“Tell me, Miyazaki-kun. Is a mysterious being you can’t even distinguish from me really so important to you?”

I’m sure he wants to counter my ill will. But unable to object, he just keeps biting down on his lips so hard that they turn white.

“Feel free to save your sister. I can’t do anything about that! But you know? [Riko Asami] is not your sister. Come on, Miyazaki-kun, tell me once again:”

I pose my question.

“Who will you save?”

Miyazaki-kun scowls at me.

I scowl back at him.

“……Damn it!!” Miyazaki-kun roars and furiously releases my collar.

He raises his fist to take his anger out on the wall… but stops and slumped over.

“……Just do what you want,” he says while gazing at the ground.

“Just do what you want! If you want to stop the Sevennight in Mud, do it out of my sight. Don’t bother me anymore. I won’t interfere anymore.”

“I’m afraid to say—that’s not enough.”

Miyazaki-kun looks up to me.

“…What is not enough?!”

“It’s literally as I said. This much determination, this much resolution is not enough. You will have to actively destroy the Sevennight in Mud for us.”

He screws up his face in anger.

“You bastard—are you aware of what you’re saying?! You seriously want me to help you torment her?!”

“I guess so.”

“Don’t fuck with me!! There’s no way I could do that! You should know that I’ve hit my limit by promising not to interfere!”

“Well, yeah, I know. After all, you were about to help her a few moments ago, right?”

“……”

“That’s why I’m saying that it’s not enough. Nothing will change with just this level of resolution! [She] will still come to you and depend upon you without doubt. And you would eventually hold out your hand again; you’d basically be supporting the Sevennight in Mud!”

Hearing my words, Miyazaki-kun averts his eyes and murmurs:

“But… I can’t abandon her so easily.”

“But you have to make a decision. [Riko Asami] will come here soon.”

“……What?”

“[Riko Asami] urged me to escape from Maria by threatening me. I decided to act as if I obeyed her demand. [She] will definitely come to you when she thinks that I complied with her demand.”

“…..The next switch occurs at 13:00, huh.”

“Yes. Until then you have to decide how you treat her. If you save [Riko Asami] and the box is completed, only [Riko Asami], who is noone at all, will remain. If you reject her, we will recover Riko Asami.”

“You want me to believe you? Haha… this is quite a stupid trade.”

“So you don’t mind the former outcome?”

Miyazaki-kun clenches his fist after hearing my words.

“…of course I do! I’m aware of it all this even without your comments! But rejecting her… that’s just impossible, isn’t it…?”

He may say that, but he is still not able to decide.

This is troublesome. Miyazaki-kun must reject [Riko Asami]. He must make her fall into despair. Therefore, I go on to the last step.

“I was always wondering. Why do you, Miyazaki-kun, believe in the existence of the Sevennight in Mud? I mean, isn’t it quite unbelievable for

someone who has never obtained a box that [Riko Asami] is inside me?”

He raises his head and peeks at my face.

“Tell me! How could you believe in something so unrealistic?”

“……what are trying to imply?”

“Can you not come up with the reason? Okay, I’ll tell you! I can only think of one reason to believe the existence of the box. Tell me, Miyazaki-kun, you have—”

I ask him a certain question that I didn’t mention to Maria.

“—met O, haven’t you?”

Miyazaki-kun’s expression stiffens up severely.

“I don’t know how you met him. But I know that O wanted you to help [Riko Asami].”

“____”

His face turns paler and paler in mute amazement.

I guess he didn’t understand right away who I meant by O. O is originally only perceptible by an owner. I was only able to perceive O when I was told his name.

…And then remembered what he had done to me.

“—Ah”

Miyazaki-kun holds his head, eyes still wide open.

“I know what you feel since I know O. It’s not like you forgot about him. You just can’t remember him. Therefore, you may not be able to remember what he told you, but it has entered your subconscious. That’s why you were able to believe in the box. And he made you think that you must help [Riko Asami].”

“……W-Wait a moment. Why… Why do you know about this anyway, Hoshino?!”

He raises his head, voice all a-tremble, unable to hide his fear.

“As I said: I don’t! But I know that O won’t achieve his goal if you don’t help [Riko Asami].”

“His goal…? What on earth is his goal…?”

“His goal is to observe me. …Well, you probably won’t understand, but it’s

the truth. But this box, while interesting to observe, is very frail. [Riko Asami] is just at too much of a disadvantage. Possessing the body of someone else is undoubtedly painful. She wouldn't be able to oppose me unless she at least has information about what's happening when it's not her turn. O had to arrange things to allow us to have a proper fight, or else this box would just be destroyed without any enjoyment for him. Thus, O used you to achieve a balance."

After hearing my words, Miyazaki-kun slowly lowers his head. Then he stops moving completely.

"…That's all I can tell you!"

This is the last spell thats shackling him. A spell unknowingly implanted in him that made him protect the box. Now that I explained everything to him, this spell should be broken.

"Okay, I'm off then. It's almost 13:00. I leave it to you to decide how to treat [Riko Asami] when she comes to meet you. Since [I] won't be there then, I can't stop you."

"……I will save her. Did you not hear me?"

I don't reply, because I realize that he just doesn't want to admit his defeat.

I close the door without checking on his expression.

"……"

I walk toward the stairs. I immediately hear someone rushing toward me from the next room. But I don't turn around.

"Kazuki… why didn't you tell me that O had been interfering!"

It's not like I chose not to tell her. It occurred to me right before we got here. There was no time to tell her.

"Why do you not answe—Kazuki???"

But her anger pleases me. I lay my head on Maria's shoulder.

I am the enemy of [Riko Asami]. Thus I have to make [Riko Asami] surrender, even if this means I must use Miyazaki-kun.

I have no other choice. I must do so. But still—

"Distressing someone is quite… distressing," I whisper, unable to raise my head.

But I chose to regain my everyday life.

I was about to sacrifice someone for my own sake. That's why I longd for

someone to blame me. To scold me by saying “You’re repulsive!”

However, Maria keeps silent for some reason.

Even worse, she gently stroked my hair.

“……”

I wonder why?

Why does this feel so pleasant, despite being the exact opposite of what I was hoping for her to do?

May 4th (Monday) 13:00

Atashi

There was no fragrance of peppermint. I was holding a weekly manga magazine in my hands as I did once before. I was able to slip out of Maria Otonashi's room.

"Haha!"

I succeeded! My threat succeeded!

The feeling of being cornered vanishes into thin air. Everything's all right. I can still fight now. First I have to meet Ryuu Miyazaki.

I leave the shop and make sure of my whereabouts. I know this main street. Ryuu Miyazaki's apartment should be nearby.

I go to his apartment and ring the chime.

Ryuu Miyazaki instantly opens the door.

His face is pale. The rings under his glasses have turned even darker. And he does not say anything. He just stares silently at me.

"…hey, what happened?"

"……Nothing."

His denial shows me, however, that something had definitely happened.

"Did Maria Otonashi do anything to you?"

"No… she didn't do anything."

His answer has no intonation whatsoever and sounds almost mechanical. Something was obviously wrong. Well, he seemed strange already before, but this strangeness is a step further.

"Won't you come in for now?" he plainly urges me. I do as he says while regarding him somewhat suspiciously.

"…What's that?"

I notice right after entering that his window was broken.

"Aah, Otonashi broke it."

Nii-san answers dispiritedly. Maria Otonashi must have done something to him. There isn't any other explanation.

"…did our strategy fail yesterday?"

"Yeah."

Another halfhearted reply. …Honestly, what's wrong?

"Why did you not answer my call?"

"…'Atashi', huh."

"Hah?"

"Didn't you use to call yourself 'Boku'?"

[TL Note: Again the matter of Boku/Atashi. See above for details.]

…Right, I have to fix that again.

"…Just a little mistake. I am no one after all."

"……It's after 13:00, huh," he says while looking into the distance.

"Well yeah, but why so out of the blue…?"

"You stole this block of time frame on the third day. Therefore it's definitely you. That's why I can be sure. But if it were 14:00… I would probably assume that Hoshino is trying to deceive me again and wouldn't realize that it's you. Unlike Maria Otonashi, I cannot distinguish you guys by the usage of your facial muscles, you know."

"……You've lost me there."

"Tell me, what do you call me?"

"Hah? 'Ryuu Miyazaki' of course; haven't I been saying that this all the time?"

"Yeah, I guess so. Right."

"Stop that weird talk. You better tell me what happened yesterday!"

"Okay."

After he nods, Ryuu Miyazaki sits down and stares at the black monitor.

"I executed our strategy. As you can see, it proved to be a failure."

I expect him to continue, so I wait while he stares at the monitor without moving. However, he doesn't speak.

"Eh? That's all…?"

“I don’t know any more! Our strategy failed and Kazuki Hoshino was taken back by Maria Otonashi. I don’t know anything about what happened thereafter. I have no idea what happened between them!”

“……What? That doesn’t help me a bit.”

“Well, I guess it doesn’t,” Ryuu Miyazaki says coldly, still without looking at me.

“……Are you planning to abandon me?”

He still doesn’t look at me.

I see. That’s what he’s up to. He will again just cover his ears and ignore everything.

“You regret it, don’t you?”

He finally looks up at me when he hears those words.

“You regret that you noticed Riko Asami’s misfortune when you rushed to her because of her plea for help—and that she involved you in this matter, right? Exactly! If you remained ignorant, you would have been able to live carelessly, just lamenting your own misfortune. If you didn’t answer Riko Asami’s call that time—”

“I don’t regret that!”

He cuts me off.

“I only regret that I didn’t notice sooner. If I had, I would have been able to avert all of this. Therefore, everything from the origin to the outcome is all my fault. I don’t want to make a mistake like that ever again!”

He finally fully turns his head toward me.

“That’s why I decided to continue helping Riko out. No matter what, this decision won’t change.”

“……Nii-san.”

My chest warms up.

Nii-san is saying this with complete honesty.

“Thank you, Nii-san… Continue to help me out!”

“‘Nii-san,’ huh.”

Nii-san nods slightly.

“Hey… let me reconfirm your goal.”

“Why so late? —Well, I don’t mind! My goal is to obtain Kazuki Hoshino. To

make [Kazuki Hoshino] surrender for the sake of this goal. To torment Kazuki Hoshino so much that he scratches his own neck open, to make him succumb so completely that he submits his own body with the words 'Please be my master' while genuflecting."

"…I see, so that's it without doubt?"

"Of course. Haven't I told you several times?"

Nii-san murmurs several times "You did, you did," lowers his gaze and stops talking. This seems weird to me, so I peek at his face.

"—Eh?"

He is crying. Nii-san is crying.

"N-Nii-san, why are you crying?"

It seems he didn't notice until I mentioned it; Nii-san confirms that he was crying by touching his cheeks in surprise, and wipes his tears away roughly with his arm.

How long has it been since I've last seen Nii-san's tears? I probably last saw them when we noticed the our parents' deception. Nii-san stopped crying entirely after that. To be able to continue fighting against an invisible something inside him, he stopped showing any weakness to others.

This person is crying.

"……I will save her."

He murmurs.

"I made this decision. I decided to help my sister out. My weak Riko. I decided to help her out at least this one time, because I had failed to support her when I was busy with my own issues. I decided. To save her. To save her, save her, save her, save her, save her. I did decide this, but—"

He raises his head and looks at me.

"—<u>Who are you</u>?"

My breathing stops.

"Riko is the one I decided to save. But—who are you? Tell me, who on earth are you!?"

"…W-What are you saying, Nii-san? I am—"

"No one. You said so yourself a few minutes ago, didn't you?"

…I did. I indeed said that.

“Exactly. You can’t be Riko. If you were Riko, why would you look like Kazuki Hoshino? But you aren’t Kazuki Hoshino either. So who are you? Tell me… why should I help out a completely unknown guy? I don’t give a fuck about you!!”

This is wrong.

I knew that these cannot be Nii-san’s true feelings.

“For me you’re just a fake copy of my sister, who I cannot distinguish from [Kazuki Hoshino]!”

These words are only intended to hurt me.

And to hurt himself.

“N-Nii-san—”

“Stop that!” Nii-san says in order to suppress the emotions rising in his heart.

“Don’t call me ‘Nii-san,’ you damn stranger!!”

Like that he crushes his heart and—

“Aah—”

—mine, as well.

Nii-san won’t save me. Because I’m not Nii-san’s sister. Yeah, that’s right. I am not Riko Asami. So who am I? Kazuki Hoshino? No. Not yet. Wait a sec… in the first place, did I really wish to become Kazuki Hoshino anyway?

“Aah—”

What is it that I really wanted?

Actually, I might have known since I obtained the box.

I recall the time before my parents divorced.

I thought we were quite a happy family. At holidays, we often went to the shopping district, watched movies or went to all-you-can-eat shabu-shabu restaurants. We were that kind of family. My father always visited my room right after he came home from work, whereupon I used to urge him unsuccessfully to knock before entering. My mother always made refined and cute boxed lunches for me. I quarreled all the time with Nii-san, but even so, we always played together.

I thought that on the whole, we were all on good terms. I never doubted that

we would always be together like other families.

But this was all a lie.

Our household didn't crumble. It had been a lie from the start.

I remember that Nii-san once said this to me when they told us about the divorce:

'That's great. So we finally don't need to act like a happy family anymore. And I'm released from these feelings of guilt.'

I couldn't grasp the meaning of those words right away. But after a while I understood. I mean, why did my parents look like they were on good terms though they would be divorcing? Why did they smile awkwardly after treating me kindly?

It was all just pretense to deceive me and make me think we were a happy family. But not even for my sake—they just did it to soothe their own feelings of guilt.

That's why I thought that 'happiness' can only be attained by stealing it from others.

But is it really something you can steal?

So, what did I want to do? I don't know. I have no idea. No clue. I don't want to know. I don't have the box anymore, after all.

But for now I ought to escape. I must escape.

I ought to slip out of this room quickly. I just have to slip out of here. Then I can still escape.

I try to quickly escape, but stumble instead. Standing up somehow seems like a waste of time, so I half-crawl toward the door.

For some reason, slender, beautiful legs, like those of a model, appear in front of me.

I look up.

"W-Why—"

The person standing there is—Maria Otonashi.

Such timing… don't tell me…?! I turn around and look at Nii-san. He is holding his head in his arms and secluding himself from everything around him. Nii-san knew that Maria Otonashi was nearby. He had already decided to abandon me. Knowing that I would come to him, he had already decided from the start to hand me over to Maria Otonashi.

“—It’s unreasonable anyway.”

She says in a monotone.

“One can’t possibly throw oneself away. Even if you did, your self would come chasing after you. You knew this since the beginning. That’s why you cannot throw yourself away even if you have the box. What you can achieve with your wish in the box doesn’t go further than this. You cannot gain anything using the Sevennight in Mud. You are just slowly swallowing mud as you sink deeper into the mud.”

The person I adore says this to me—the person who was unable to emulate her.

So what about you? Are you also unable to gain anything because you have thrown yourself away?

I look up at her face. Her glance seems sorrowful to me somehow.

I have to escape. But where to? This room isn’t my refuge and Maria Otonashi is blocking the way in front of me. I’m still just crawling on the floor and can’t do anything. I can’t go anywhere.

I, can’t go, anywhere.

“Let me ask you a question. I asked this already once long ago, but answer me once more. Tell me—”

She posed her question.

“—<u>Who are you</u>?”

I’m—

“<u>Who am I…</u>?”

I’m the one who wants to know that.

She takes her cell phone out for some reason and holds it out to me, as I sit on the ground.

“Let me tell you who you are.”

It was [his] voice, the voice of the one who doesn’t doubt his identity, no matter how hard I rattle his existence.

[Kazuki Hoshino] answers my question.

“You are nobody at all; You’re <u>just an enemy</u> who only exists to be defeated by me.”

“No……”

I am not such a being.

I don’t live for your sake! As if I’d accept such an absurdity!

“—<u>I am Riko Asami</u>!!”

I admit it, but then I realize that I just made a big mistake.

I mean, I cannot possibly become Kazuki Hoshino anymore, now that I admitted to being Riko Asami. I cannot make myself believe that anymore. My retreat was just cut off.

The moment I realize that—

“Aa, aaaAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!!”

The box suddenly starts to swell up. It rushes through my veins like a bullet and hurts my whole body, it hurts, aah, I can’t endure it! Stop it, it hurts, stop it, someone save me! I want to take it out! But I cannot take it out, I can’t, I can’t. The box doesn’t exist in this body! But then why does it hurt? Stop it, stop it stop it!!

“I got it… I got it already, so stop it…”

It’s because I understood that I cannot be anyone but myself.

I made a mistake. I sought the wrong wish from this box. I don’t need such a body. That doesn’t make any sense. I… I only—

“I only wanted to attain happiness!”

But this is not possible anymore.

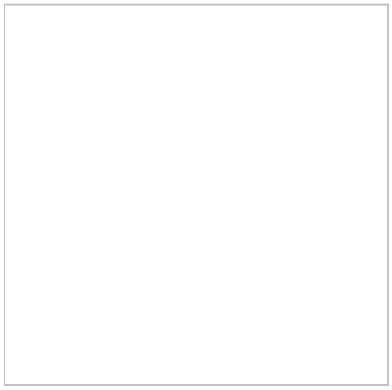
Happiness doesn’t await me anymore, since I am on a blood-stained path.

I clung to the girl who succeeded in becoming a different self, who called herself a box.

I won’t make that mistake anymore. I won’t make that mistake anymore, so please!

“Save me!”

May 4th (Monday) 14:00



Strangely enough, I immediately notice that my vision is blurry because of the tears in my eyes.

I wipe away those tears, and see Maria standing in front of me, suppressing her feelings.

May 5th

May 5th (Tuesday) 02:10

I’m dreaming.

I’m dreaming the same dream again.

I toyed with the rabbit plush, missing an ear, in front of the corpses. I plunged my index finger into the torn seam and widened the hole.

I put my fingers into the head and moved them around. The shape of the rabbit’s head changed. The touch of cotton feels good. Back and forth, up and down. The eyeball came unstuck. Cotton fell out of its torn face.

I looked at my hands. Except for the fact that they’re stained with blood, that began to dry, they shouldn’t have changed. But those hands looked to me as if they had rotted and became pitch black.

My body is full of something like mud, consisting only of hatred. I want to cut up my body and scrape this mud out.

“I see. This is rather interesting.”

“Eek!”

This sudden voice startled me so much my heart had leapt into my throat.

“This is an outstanding distortion for an incident that happened near this boy. I’m interested indeed. The way you’re involved in this incident is splendid and your feelings for this boy seem amusing, too.”

I turned around and looked at the owner of this voice.

He looks… Aah, right, that’s because it’s a dream, huh. He looked obscure as if he was veiled in haze. I couldn’t even recognize his gender.

“W-Who are you? S-Since when have you been here?”

Instead of answering, he (she?) just smiled.

I looked at Nii-san without thinking. He did not notice this person yet as it seems and was still crying soundlessly in dismay.

Where am I anyway? This was supposed to be my home, but something's wrong. It didn't feel real, almost as if I slipped into a photo.

"You are a very interesting being as well, though not as much as this boy. I knew already that humans get empty inside when they hate themselves, but observing this with my very own eyes is truly amusing. I see no reason not to give you a box."

Ignoring my questions completely, he said weird things.

But there was something I understood.

He is charming. Incredibly.

"Do you have a wish?"

Of course I do. I was always begging, after all.

"This is a box that grants any wish!"

He said so in his charming voice and held some kind of container out to me. As he mentioned, this looked like a box. But for some reason I could not perceive it clearly, although it was virtually right in front of me.

I tried touching it.

I realized that it's 'real' just by this. Not because of something like logic, but because I felt with my entire body that it is 'real'.

I accepted it.

"How can I use it…?"

"Picture your wish precisely to yourself. That's all! Humans have the ability to grant wishes from the beginning. Therefore, this box isn't so special. It merely simplifies your wish and makes it easier to be granted like that."

My wish is to stop being Riko Asami. To become someone other than Riko Asami, whom I despise.

So who shall I become?

The first that came to mind was my adored Maria Otonashi. But this is impossible. She is no human after all. She's not a being someone like me could become.

But then it occurred to me.

"I wish,"

He is the boy that can call everyday life important as if it was a matter of fact. He is the boy that obtained Maria Otonashi for some reason.

“Everyday life is important”? Don’t kid me. Try saying that again after experiencing my everyday life! I can’t forgive him for enjoying happiness without reason.

Hence, give it all to me!

“I want to replace Kazuki Hoshino.”

When I had spoke this out, the box started folding up. When the box became tiny and hard, it flew towards me like a bullet and penetrated into my body through my eye. Without leaving me enough time to feel any pain, it entered my heart and started to rule my entire body over the veins. I’m, I’m, I’m, I’m being cut up, crushed, torn apart, scattered about, ruled by the box, ruled and —I vanished.

“Replace him, huh? Huhu… you are truly unfortunate.”

He said with a charming smile.

“How unfortunate for you to realize just being a replacement.”

Why? It is only bliss that I vanish.

“An empty human can only picture an empty wish. I’m sorry, but I was fully aware of that, you know?”

He said with a truly charming, gentle smile.

“Aah, how adorable! To think you could escape from your own deeds just by this; I find this childish side of you terribly adorable!”

And then my dream continued with me being thrown into the mud.

Swallowing mud, unable to breathe or speak.

May 5th (Tuesday) 06:15

I had awoken already a while ago.

But I was just lying on Maria Otonashi's bed like a puppet, lacking the willpower to move. I have to come in contact with Riko Asami. Even while knowing that, I cannot move.

Maria Otonashi had sat down on a seat and was looking at me all the time.

And yet, I can't move. I can't even avert my eyes from this piercing glance of hers.

After a while of exchanging glances, she was finally the one who ran out of patience and averted her eyes. She stood up and left to somewhere.

She came back after a few moments and pressed a cup of coffee upon me. I just viewed the steam in front of my eyes. I didn't accept the cup for a long time, which made her run out of patience again; she started drinking the coffee herself and said something like "Bitter…".

"……Mhh, right, since I'm idle anyway, I'll talk a bit to myself."

She said so while looking with a frown at the cup.

"I am a box. I can, in fact, grant wishes exactly as the box does."

She said so as if it was just incidentally to drinking coffee.

"But I'm a failure as a box. The happiness I can bring is only fabricated and fake."

She seemed to be talking indifferently, but I could clearly see bitterness in her expression.

"I wonder what happiness is. Is it something you can obtain depending on your sentiments? If so, can someone who unwillingly erased her entire family obtain happiness just by changing her heart?"

I thought she was talking about me. But this might not be true.

"…I think it's impossible. <u>I am here because I think so.</u>"

She has to be talking about herself.

“I don’t know your circumstances exactly. But I don’t think you can attain happiness just by changing one sentiment in your situation. Aren’t you thinking so, too?”

Exactly. Hell awaits me wherever I go.

“You wanted me to ‘save’ you, right?”

She said so after emptying her coffee.

“If you don’t mind it being flawed, I shall grant you a wish.”

Normally one would think this is a blatant lie. But she was deadly serious.

Therefore, this was more than enough, leaving aside whether to believe it or not.

“……really?”

It was more enough to make me open my mouth.

“Yeah. If every path leads you to hell, I shall present you with another one. It may be just an illusion, but in your case you have no other choice, right?”

If she wanted to raise my hopes just to make me move, she wouldn’t speak like this.

“But are you alright with using such an unrealistic power, Maria-san…? Don’t you have to pay some kind of compensation for using your power, like in a Manga?”

Maria Otonashi kept silent.

“So there is a catch, right?”

“…Nothing you should care about.”

“If you phrase it like this, I care about it all the more!”

She let out a sigh to my words and said:

“I lose a part of my memory.”

“Eh…?”

“By using the Flawed Bliss, I forget about the target of the wish and the people that had to do with him up to a certain point. In fact, I have almost no memories. Neither do I have memories of my family, nor of my friends. I only have the memory that I wished to do so on my own accord.”

“What the…?”

This is just too cruel.

“…But doesn’t this mean that you would forget about Kazuki Hoshino when using the box on me…?”

She didn’t reply to this question.

Surely because I was right.

“…I don’t get it! Why would you go this far just for my sake? You’d even abandon the memories of a dear person, why…?”

“That’s my affair. As I mentioned before, it’s nothing you should care about.”

“There’s no w—”

“You’re the same as me.”

She interrupted me.

“I don’t want to see you in misfortune. I wouldn’t be able to bear up with this. In the first place, do you think I would have turned into a box if I overlooked such things!”

And for this sake she’d be ready to lose dear memories?

That’s just weird. Weird, but—

Exactly because of that she was able to become a perfect creation.

If I can escape hell by this, and if it’s what she’s wishing for, then I shall accept her offer.

“Please lend me the phone.”

Maria Otonashi nodded and handed Kazuki Hoshino’s mobile phone over to me.

I noticed that my phone number was noted in the dialed calls history. I guess they tried to call me on my phone.

But that’s not enough to get in touch with her.

I, too, had tried to reach her on that number, but it didn’t connect. She didn’t phone me from my number.

It was the number of Yuuhei Ishihara’s phone.

I dialed. After a few moments,

“Hello?,”

Riko Asami answered the phone.

May 5th (Tuesday) 21:42

When completing the note I got from Miyazaki-kun on May 2nd, it turns out like this.

00-01	01-02	23-24	1st day
02-03	03-04	04-05	2nd day
11-12	13-14	15-16	3rd day
09-10	16-17	20-21	4th day
06-07	08-09	19-20	5th day
05-06	07-08	17-18	6th day
12-13	14-15	18-19	7th day End

The three remaining cells ‘10-11’, ‘21-22’ and ‘22-23’ indicate the time that belongs to [Kazuki Hoshino] today. If I don’t stop the Sevennight in Mud today, [Kazuki Hoshino]‘s time blocks will shrink to 0.

It’s 21:43. In other words, [Kazuki Hoshino] has one hour and 17 minutes left until it’s 23:00.

Until then we have to do anything we can.

The preparations for this have already ended.

[Riko Asami] got in touch with ‘Asami-san’. ‘Asami-san’ accepted our wish to meet her and stated time and place.

And now we were facing Riko Asami.

The place that was suggested by ‘Asami-san’ was our school. The school does have a security system, but it doesn’t activate just by climbing over the school gate.

The school was empty because of the Golden Week.

She was standing in the midst of the desolate schoolyard.

“Why do you think I have decided to meet you?”

As expected, her whispering voice was completely different from the

speaking style were used from her.

“I know Maria-san’s aim, after all. You came in order to avert my suicide and steal my *box*, right? But even though this is inconvenient for me, I decided to meet you. Do you know why?”

Asami-san said and seemed somehow unable to focus her eyes.

“I wanted to see you once more for the last time at the end. I wanted to see the person I adored; the person who achieved what I didn’t: creating the perfect self.”

“You’re wrong.”

Maria interrupted her with a distinct voice.

“You want me to stop you from committing such a silly act like throwing your life away.”

Riko Asami listened silently to Maria.

And then her mouth curled slightly up.

“I’m afraid such clichéd words don’t work for me. What a shame… I didn’t want you to say such a painful thing.”

“Hmpf, why did you meet us, then? Do you think I can’t see that you’re afraid of dying?”

“You’re rather my guarantee.”

“…guarantee?”

“I thought you might kill me when I noticed my fear of committing suicide.”

Riko Asami spoke so indifferently.

“……”

I wonder why? Why does their exchange—make me so irritated?

There should be other feelings I ought to have. Nervousness, fear, sympathy—those feelings would be much more natural. And yet, why am I feeling irritation?

I thought and thought—and noticed.

—Oh no, this can’t…

“Asami-san.”

I had probably noticed this unknowingly. It’s only reasonable to get irritated then! This idle talk is completely meaningless, isn’t it?

“You have met Miyazaki-kun during the Sevennight in Mud, right?”

Asami-san nodded slowly to my sudden question.

“To make us believe that there’s no escape from the Sevennight in Mud, Miyazaki-kun lied to us that the *owner* was dead. He tried to make me give up to complete this box.”

“…So?”

Asami-san urged me to continue, whereupon I nodded.

“I’m sure Miyazaki-kun was convinced that we wouldn’t be able to find you. But you’re alive. So where did this conviction come from?”

Asami-san hesitated only for a moment and said:

“…That’s because I promised to hide when I met him. Hence, Nii-san—”

“Why?”

I broke in on her and asked so.

“Why would you, who was ready to commit suicide in order to stop the Sevennight in Mud, need to cooperate with Miyazaki-kun, an ally of the [Riko Asami] who desires its completion?”

She kept quiet.

“Isn’t this a little mismatched?”

“…You wouldn’t understand my conflict, Kazuki Hoshino.”

I can’t endure it anymore. I can’t bear up against this hatred anymore.

“It’s disgusting! Stop this weird speaking style already!”

“……This is my original way of talking. I guess you don’t know about it, but since middle school—”

“Now won’t you stop this acting already? You don’t want to hide anyway since you decided to appear before us again, right? So,”

“Stop this tone already, O!”

Maria opened her eyes wide and looked at Asami-san—no, O.

The expression on Asami-san’s face disappeared. I could no longer feel anything from Riko Asami in this inhuman face.

“You started this acting already on April 30th, right? Your bad taste is just

over the top! Now that I think of it, Asami-san only felt strange to me at the time. By the next day, Haruaki forgot that she had been strange. That's because of your characteristic that everyone except the owner forgets about you, isn't it? You never did enter the classroom because Miyazaki-kun was there, right?"

Asami-san was still expressionlessly listening to me.

"Miyazaki-kun was only able to tell this big lie that Asami-san's dead, because he knew that her body was taken over by you, O. If an inhuman being like you tells him something like 'I won't appear anymore' after taking Asami-san's body over, he would naturally believe it. "

Asami-san did still not change her expression.

"He may have forgotten about your existence, but seems like he hasn't forgotten about the fact that his sister was taken over by someone. Hence, the only salvation for Miyazaki-kun was to complete the Sevennight in Mud. This is how you made him [my] enemy. This is how you prepared the stage to make [me] and [Riko Asami] able to fight each other."

I scowled at Asami-san and declared:

"Like this, you enjoyed observing me."

The moment I finished speaking—

"Huhu"

This void expression crumbled down and Riko Asami vanished completely.

No, the body was still the same. But it's obvious now. Riko Asami cannot exist within this expression. No human would be able to form such an abysmal smile.

"Oh, I really have to praise you!"

"O" clapped his hands while maintaining the smile. He can keep his composure because he knows for sure that he's out of our reach, no matter if we found him.

"…You seem quite amused, O."

Maria said with a frown.

"Amused? Huhu, of course I am! This time was really worth observing. It was truly interesting to see how Kazuki Hoshino would react when his body was stolen, how he would think, how he would suffer! I hadn't expected that you would perceive [Riko Asami] distinctly as the 'enemy' and hurt her. Huhu, compared to last time it was a very short time, but a bounteous harvest

nonetheless.”

“You pervert.”

Maria’s insult did, however, not make “O” stop his smile.

“Very well—I’ll give this box to you, then.”

I was unable to understand his words right away.

What did he just say? Give the box to us? Why? We have not even started the negotiations for the box…

“……what are you scheming?”

Maria asked for me.

“Oh? Is my behavior strange, perhaps?”

“Do you want to tell me that this calm attitude of yours is just a bluff and that you’re cornered because we found you?”

“Your answer misses the mark entirely. Why do I need to be cornered? …I see, it seems there is a misunderstanding. My goal is not to be your hindrance, but to observe Kazuki Hoshino, you know? I was able to enjoy observing him more than enough in this box. I have already achieved my goal. Therefore I have no reason not to give you this obsolete box.”

Now that he mentions it, it’s evident. “O’s” goal was not to complete the Sevennight in Mud. No, if it were completed, this would rather—

“Ah…!”

“Oh, seems like you noticed even though I made no mention of it. How pitiful.”

Surely he’s happy to have seen my pale face. “O” said so with a smiling expression.

“Exactly, the box you call Sevennight in Mud was not supposed to be completed from the beginning. Riko Asami is a quite amusing human, really. But I would never sacrifice my dear object of observation just because of such a minor existence. Letting [Riko Asami] take over ‘Kazuki Hoshino’? I can’t allow this.”

“O” chuckled.

“Therefore, no matter whether you found me or not, I would have given you the box eventually. Giving you the box readily is not strange at all.”

I looked at [Riko Asami] as hostile in order to get myself back.

For this sake, I hurt [Riko Asami] and made her suffer. I even involved Miyazaki-kun in this. I even betrayed Maria once.

And yet,

Although I went through all this,

“It was all futile.”

After all I just danced to “O’s” pipe?

If so, what was the point in this week…

“It was not futile.”

Having heard this denial, I looked at her without thinking.

Maria, who declared so, gave “O” a daring grin.

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t you get it? Kazuki’s goal is to regain his everyday life. It’s only natural that he gives his all to achieve this goal. That’s why nothing would have changed. Even if he was able to guess that you had no plans to complete the Sevennight in Mud, his actions would not have changed.”

“Why so?”

“O” asked curiously.

“It’s a matter of course.”

Maria said as if she was laughing at O.

“One could never rely on something fragile like your whim.”

Aah, I see. The deed of handing the “box” over to me is merely a whim he does “because this ends up the most amusing for him.”

I would never rely on something like this and not move. Even if it was wasted effort, I would have given my all to find a solution for this “box.”

“I see. But leaving Kazuki-kun aside, for you it was entirely wasted effort. This box can already not be used again, after all.”

“What a laughable simple thinking. Your appearance helped me advance at least one step forward. Because you just proved that I will run across O or boxes if I’m together with Kazuki.”

“Hm…?”

Having heard her words, “O” opened his eyes wide affectedly.

“Are you serious?”

Maria answered with an amazed expression.

“Hey, I have already spent a life’s time chasing after the box. Why would you doubt my words?”

“No, that’s not what I mean! I don’t care about your foolishness. I’m asking whether this proof that you can come across me when being together with Kazuki-kun has any meaning.”

Maria’s opened her eyes wide to these words. And then she turned slowly pale.

“You hadn’t noticed… or rather, you hadn’t thought about it deeply?”

“O” said with a smile.

“This proof is meaningless. You plan to leave Kazuki-kun anyway, don’t you?”

Wh…at…?

“D-Don’t talk nonsense!”

“Huhu, isn’t this pale face of hers the best proof for the truth of my words? You know, Kazuki-kun? She’s planning to let [Riko Asami] use her box!”

“Using the Flawed Bliss…?”

Having touched that box, I know. Having seen this ground of the sea, I know.

Letting someone use her own “box.” This is an absolute taboo. Even I know that using her “box” is a fatal mistake.

“If she does so, she will forget about you. Having lost those memories, she will certainly go away from you guys.”

“W-Why do you know such a thing!”

“Because it was always like this when she let someone use her box.”

I looked at Maria without knowing. Seeing her biting her lips, I realized that he’s telling the truth.

“Why would you want to use the Flawed Bliss…?”

“…Didn’t I tell you? I cannot accept the inevitable misfortune that awaits Asami.”

For this sake you don’t mind ignoring your own desires…?

Aah, I see. She was always like this. She is a person who can even throw her own life away to save another person.

“I am a box. I am not human. I have to exist for the sake of saving others.

Right, because of this—”

Maria regained her imposing expression and declared distinctly:

“I shall stay [Aya Otonashi]”

But where are [Maria Otonashi]‘s feelings in those words?

‘—don’t lose sight of me anymore’

Weren’t those the true feelings of Maria? Weren’t those the true feelings of the girl that could no longer bear up against solitude?

This is just wrong. Ignoring one’s own feelings cannot be right.

But I can’t tell her that it’s wrong carelessly. Not knowing what made her gain so much resolution, I can’t deny her.

“Maria.”

Therefore I can only speak out this name, that only I had been able to call, and confront her with my own feelings.

“I don’t want that.”

Maria’s face stiffened up slightly.

“I definitely don’t want you to forget about me and disappear!”

“……Kazuki.”

“That’s cruel! While telling me not to lose sight of you, you plan to lose sight of me! That’s just cruel!”

Maria looked at the ground after hearing my cry and bit her lips.

“……But if I don’t, Asami will—”

I gripped Maria’s right hand forcibly which made her stop her words. She looked at me wide-eyedly.

“Asami-san will be all right.”

“…Why can you say so?”

“Because I believe in something you may not be able to believe in and what may make you irritated.”

I put some more power into my grip.

“I believe that there is no despair that can’t be solved by the everyday life.”

I noticed that her fingers were more delicate than I had expected. No, not only her fingers. Maria’s entire body is delicate. In contrast to her personality.

“Therefore Asami-san will be all right, even if the Sevennight in Mud gets destroyed. There’s no way only despair would await her!”

“……you want me to believe in that?”

She whispered.

I already thought that it would be rejected by her.

I mean, she seeks the “box.” There’s no way she could accept me, who believes in the everyday life, when she seeks the “box” that brings destruction to the everyday life.

But I believe in the everyday life nonetheless.

“She just has to find hope.”

“…What?”

“I admit that despair might await Asami-san. But there is even hope within this despair! At least I know of one.”

“What hope…?”

“There is a person that values Asami-san just this much. Can’t this become her hope?”

I noticed that faint hesitation started to appear within her expression.

“…Surely this would apply if nothing had happened. But Asami is going to go to prison for a long time without doubt because of that incident.”

“But even so, if the two of them combine their power, they will be all right. If they realize how dear they are to each other, they will be all right! Don’t you think so?”

“……”

“Maybe it is mere conceit that allows me to say that I understand Asami-san. There is still one hour left to [Riko Asami]. You can still confirm her feelings before coming to a decision! …No, don’t just confirm, please help her find hope. I’m sure there is.”

I pressed her hand a little tighter.

“You might as well bring her real happiness instead of an illusion!”

Having said so, I let go of her hand. Maria gazed fixedly at her own hand.

“……U-Umm, now’s Golden Week, right?”

Upon hearing my sudden words, Maria raised an eyebrow and raised her head.

“Because of all this we had no time to enjoy our holidays, right? But, you know, tomorrow’s still a holiday, so umm…”

I closed my eyes, pulled myself up and spoke.

“So, umm… let’s go somewhere tomorrow. Err… right, let’s go eat strawberry tart. You mentioned you like that, right?”

Maria opened her eyes wide. She had been stiffened up all the time, but her cheeks softened now as if this was a lie.

“Huhu… what are you saying?”

“Y-You don’t want to?”

“…This will mean that you spent each day of the Golden Week with me, you know?”

“Eh? Is there a problem with that?”

When I said so tilting my head, Maria smiled wryly for some reason.

“Never mind.”

“Mh? So will you promise?”

Promise.

When I spoke this word out, her mouth strained again.

Maria looked once down. She reflected upon the meaning of such a promise and opened her eyes again. Her mouth relaxed, she raised the corners of her mouth and said to me in a awe-inspiring but gentle voice:

“I promise. I promise you a future in which we can go eat strawberry tart peacefully tomorrow.”

Yeah, so I have nothing to worry about anymore.

Like this, I waited for the last switching.

May 5th (Tuesday) 23:00

Nothing ended.

Although Maria Otonashi had promised me that I would never switch again to this body, nothing ended.

For some reason I was standing in the midst of the schoolyard, but here was nothing but darkness. I know the school building's nearby, but I can't see anything. Nothing. Nothing's nearby.

Only Riko Asami and me were facing each other.

I don't get it. What's this situation? Where did Maria-san go?

"It's been a while."

Riko Asami opened her mouth in front of me.

I raised an eyebrow. Something's wrong?

"Huhu, I suppose you don't recognize me in this appearance. I am O!"

"Eh?"

An obviously different tone in the voice and a charming smile I would never be able to do. Aah, right. Indeed, this person is "O".

"Why are you in Riko Asami's appearance before me…? And where's Maria-san…?"

"O" only smiled to this question, and just approached me silently without reply. Because of this queer intensity of him, I stepped back instinctively.

"Kazuki Hoshino said that there's even hope in your everyday life!"

He said so and reached out for me. Then he put his fingers into my mouth.

"A-gh…?"

"Though there couldn't possibly be."

Riko Asami's fingers ran wild in my mouth. They got dirty with my saliva. This saliva on her fingers tasted almost like the body fluids of an insect to me.

"Because you perceive your own taste just by this."

“O” said with my looks.

“—which is the taste of mud.”

…Yeah, it tastes like that indeed.

It’s bitter, incredibly bitter—I can’t bear it. Although this should be Kazuki Hoshino’s body, mud started to spread slowly like a virus. My body blackens. It gets stained with the color of sin. The filthy mud overflows and violates me.

“O” took his fingers out of my mouth. I fell on my knees. The mud inside me shook once because of this.

“Your repulsion against yourself can’t be helped. You were—”, I felt nauseous when I heard this word. “—by the person you hated the most. Thus, this mud inside you will stay there for all eternity.”

“O” laid his hand on my shoulder. I raised my head and saw the face of Riko Asami I don’t even want to see.

“There can’t possibly be hope for you, who cannot get rid of her own mud.”

I know this much.

There’s no way I’d find hope in my everyday life. There was none until now. So why should there be any for me, now that I committed a crime on top of being stained?

Riko Asami is no more.

“That’s not true.”

I turned around to this voice behind me, still on my knees.

Maria Otonashi was standing there with wild breath. Besides her was Nii-san. Nii-san, who does not consider me his sister anymore.

“You were faster than expected.”

“What the hell was this violence against [Riko Asami], O!”

Maria Otonashi roared angry at “O”.

“Huhu… I’d prefer if you and Kazuki Hoshino-kun got separated, you know. I just adjusted her a bit to my convenience. …Well, did you find something that could give her hope?”

“I did.”

Maria Otonashi affirmed right away.

“O” did not change his expression to this reaction, however.

“Riko.”

Nii-san called my name. A terribly strange feeling.

I see, because it's the first time. The first time Nii-san addressed me by this name since I've got into this body.

"…what is it at this late hour? You don't consider me your 'younger sister', do you?"

"You're finally aware of being Riko Asami, right? If so, things change. I can call you 'Riko Asami'."

I kept quiet, so Nii-san continued.

"Tell me, what do you plan to do now? The Sevennight in Mud is going to get destroyed. You will return to being Riko Asami. You and I will get separated. What will you do then?"

"I will use Maria-san's box!"

"Asami. Sorry, but I take that back."

"Eh…?"

I looked without thinking at Maria Otonashi.

"After listening to Miyazaki, I changed my mind. I can't let you use this box."

She said boldly without showing any shame for revoking her promise.

No, it's obvious! I'm sure she realized how foolish it would be to lose her memory just for my sake.

"Then I'll die!"

A completely natural answer. This is of course the best solution in this case.

Nii-san frowned to my words and spat out those words:

"Do you think [Riko Asami] belongs only to you?"

"…Huh?"

I am Riko Asami. Therefore, I belong to me. Isn't this natural?

"Why are you looking so surprised? You belong to yourself? No way!"

Nii-san said, amazed at me.

"You also belong to me! And not only that. You also belong to Maria Otonashi, and you belong to Kazuki Hoshino. So, you know,"

He scowled at me.

"I won't permit you to die on your own accord!"

I don’t get it.

I don’t get why Nii-san says so to me with a gentle face.

“So how is my sin forgiven…? I’m not even allowed to die?! Two people are dead because of me. I have to—”

“Riko.”

He stopped me from continuing.

“This is the main reason why I decided to not let you use my box. I misunderstood. Well, Miyazaki may have kept quiet about it purposely, but I misunderstood the truth.”

Maria Otonashi continued.

“Ryuu Miyazaki was the one who killed those two, right?”

…No. Surely, it was Nii-san who conducted it. But I knew that this would happen when I sought help from him. Nii-san merely realized my wish at the time and executed it.

Hence, this is my sin.

“Don’t misunderstand, Riko! I didn’t kill them in your stead. I hated them. I detested them. I was just unable to control these intense feelings of mine.”

That’s a lie.

Sure, he might have hated them. But just with those feelings, he would not have been able to execute it. He crossed the last line because he wanted to free me. I was the one who made him pull the trigger.

“I thought about escaping with you. But this isn’t realistic. We are still minors and wouldn’t be able to live the life on the run. Even if we could, I don’t think we’d find happiness in a life of being chased.”

Nii-san smiled wryly and spoke.

“Thus, I will deliver myself up. I will prove your innocence. This is the best decision I can make.”

Nii-san is trying to take all my sin from me and take it together with him to prison.

“……Why do you, for my sake, such—”

“Don’t make me say such a thing!”

I don’t get it at all. Why? We may be siblings, but we are different humans. He doesn’t profit from doing something for me.

Nii-san took something out of his bag and gave it to me.

I accepted it silently. The touch of it seemed familiar to me. I looked at this 'something' I had accepted.

"—Ah."

My voice leaked out.

I mean, wasn't this destroyed? Wasn't everything important to me destroyed?

"I washed it, stuffed it with cotton and sewed it back together. That's all. Well, it's certainly not like new, but you can say it's repaired, right?"

It was a rabbit plush.

The stuffed plush I had received from Nii-san, who had won it for me in a UFO catcher.

"A, ah—"

I knelt down. A cry left my mouth unwittingly and I started to shed tears. Those tears washed some of the mud inside me away. …Of course, not all of it. I won't get rid of this mud. —But some of it was indeed washed away now.

Maybe,

Maybe—

"……Nii-san"

Maybe I didn't even need to wish to the box to begin with. Maybe I just hadn't noticed.

Because I'm sure—

—my wish was already granted a long time ago.

"I'm sorry, Nii-san. It was all my fault, I'm sorry."

Because I hadn't noticed this, Nii-san had to substitute for me. If I had valued myself, the outcome would have differed.

"This time it's my turn to save you, Nii-san."

I wiped my tears away and stood up. Nii-san was looking at me slightly surprisedly.

"I will save you from suffering… I'll wait for you. Until we can be together again, I will wait for you."

My voice was still trembling and my smile was kind of forced, but even so, I said distinctly:

“I will wait for you as Riko Asami.”

Wide-eyed, Nii-san was frozen for a while, but then his expression relaxed slowly.

Unlike yesterday, vitality was dwelling in his eyes.

“You know what?”

Nii-san opened his mouth while smiling.

“‘I didn’t make it in time.’ I always thought like this. But perhaps—perhaps I made it barely in time.”

I can definitely not say that I’m fully satisfied with this outcome. Nii-san and I will, without doubt, hate our past until death.

Nonetheless, we managed to get hold of something that allows us to somehow persevere.

Undoubtedly, we grasped it.

Maria Otonashi, who had watched us silently, nodded with a smile.

“So I could fulfill my promise with Kazuki.”

Having said so, her smile disappeared with her scowling at “O”.

“Now out with the box!”

“O” nodded without stopping to smile.

My “box,” the “Sevennight in Mud,” is going to end with this. “O” held his hand against his, Riko Asami’s, eye. My eyeball got touched. Although I’m not the one who is being touched right now, I’m feeling it.

“O” reached into the eye as if he wanted to take it out. Unable to endure the pain, I screamed low-voiced and closed my eyes. It hurts! …But while it really hurts, I think it’s right. I feel it’s right. Hence, I endured the pain of my eyeballs being crushed.

The pain stopped. I looked once again at “O”.

He had finished his work. My eyeball was unharmed and “O” was holding a little, black “box” in his hand that looked like a bullet.

“So is this perhaps the proof for Kazuki Hoshino-kun’s words, ‘there is no despair that can’t be solved by the everyday life’?”

“……This time, maybe.”

“Huhu… I see. You have no other choice but to say so. It is, after all, a denial

of your existence as a box. Kazuki-kun can say really cruel things."

Maria Otonashi scowled at "O" and stole the "box" out of his hands rudely.

"With this I can go be together with Kazuki. That's all I want for now."

"Are you procrastinating your conclusion? Do you still not decide whether you'll return to being [Maria Otonashi] or stay [Aya Otonashi]?"

"What a silly question."

Maria Otonashi gazed at the Sevennight in Mud in her hands. She bit on her lips as if she hated this box.

"The answer was decided a long time ago."

"I suppose so."

"O" replied half-heartedly, seeming uninterested.

"I am a box."

She stopped biting on her lips and spoke.

"I can't return to me back when I was not a box yet."

Her strong gaze.

It was the expression of the creation I had adored all this time.

"Therefore it's the best to maintain my current individuality. You may take this as 'Choosing to stay [Aya Otonashi]'."

"Then why do you keep company with Kazuki Hoshino?"

"____"

She kept silent.

"Isn't this rather inconvenient for you? Didn't you offer Riko Asami to use your box because you thought so, too?"

"…I have no idea what you mean."

"Huhu, you might still be captivated by the curse of the world of recurrences. This Kasumi Mogi might be a powerful enemy of yours, right?"

"……hmpf."

She looked again at the "box" and rolled it between her hands.

"……I had decided. Long ago. And yet this Kazuki said 'I don't want that'…!"

She murmured with a tiny voice and revealed, only for a moment, a bitter

face.

But, she erased this expression right away. She regained the expression of the perfect creation, which I found beautiful.

But I'm sure the creator of this creation went through great pains and sorrow while creating it.

I wonder how she, who granted the "wish" of the "Sevennight in Mud" already with her sole will, had looked over me and the "box."

At last, she bit on her lips, looked at the bullet-like "box" and—

—crushed the "Sevennight in Mud" with a hint of sorrow.

May 5th (Tuesday) 23:56

This awakening was clearly different from the others. I felt strangely refreshed. I felt now that my body really had been stolen by [Riko Asami].

I opened my mobile phone and checked the time.

‘23:57’

[I] was here in the time frame that was stolen from me on the first day by [Riko Asami].

It’s over.

But leaving me no time to be deeply moved, my body was suddenly grasped tightly.

“Eh?! Ah… M-Maria…?”

She’s embracing me?

But it’s not a gentle hug at all. It was a tight pressure as if trying to adhere to me.

“W-What’s the matter?”

She didn’t reply to my question.

Because I couldn’t help it, I let her continue hugging me as she pleased. I couldn’t see her expression.

“……Say it one more time.”

“Eh?”

“I’m telling you to say ‘Maria’ one more time.”

“……err, M-Maria.”

“……say it once more.”

“Maria.”

“……”

She kept quiet.

“It’s your fault.”

Maria said suddenly.

“Don’t get carried away. In the first place, I’m only together with you because I can meet O like this. There is no deeper meaning in it. And yet you’re always getting carried away and doing purely unnecessary things. All my suffering this time was your fault.”

“……I don’t really get it, but isn’t that a bit cruel?”

“It’s the truth, you fool.”

When she finished speaking, she thrust me away.

This time, violence?!

And yet, she’s smiling happily after all.

“Well, shall we go then?”

“Eh? Where to?”

“What are you saying? Didn’t you promise me yesterday, that we’d go eat strawberry tart tomorrow?”

“…Well, sure I said that. But it’s still the fifth of—”

“Look at the time.”

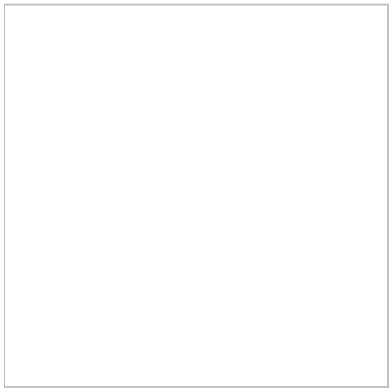
I took my mobile phone out as told.

‘00:00’

The date had changed, actually.

“I know a family restaurant that is open at night and serves strawberry tart. Let’s go there.”

“E, eeh? T-That’s not the problem… doesn’t ‘tomorrow’ usually stand for having slept and woken u—”



“Stop nitpicking. Let’s go quickly.”

Maria then pulled my hand.

Duh… maybe I should not have made such a promise? I have a hunch that I'm also going to be dragged around all day tomorrow.

…Well, I don't mind, I guess?

Since it's not disagreeable at all.

While being dragged along by Maria, I looked at the two who remained at the center of the schoolyard.

Two intimate siblings were smiling while taking each other's hands there.

May 18th

While crumpling up a package of beef tongue flavored Umaibōs, I look

around the classroom. My classmates weren't paying attention to me anymore. They seem a little nervous because of our midterms start tomorrow.

"Ya, Kazu-kun!"

"Ouch"

Kokone karate-chops my head while greeting me.

"……Morning."

"You know, I was actually only strolling. In Shibuya."

"Hah?"

Kokone suddenly starts to speak triumphantly.

"I just planned to go to Marui or to listen to some music at HMV. But I guess the world just can't overlook my charm! And these E-Cups of mine!"

Now they're even one size bigger…

She lays a fashion magazine on my desk and points her finger at it. There's a photo of Kokone standing in Shibuya with a smile on her face.

"Ah, wow."

This is my honest impression. Kokone becomes even more elated.

"Hohoho, by the way, in just those two hours I was approached five times, including some flirts. I rejected them but then I was even scouted as a model… Sigh… society just doesn't seem to want to let go of me. So, how do you like this photo? How is it?"

"……Well, it's good, I guess?"

"You think so, too? And just look at my comment! 'I just mistook the cords of my parka for my earphones and put them into my ears!☆' What a tasteful comment by a cute clumsy girl. That's Moe."

"Moe, right."

Because it would probably get messy if I say unnecessary things, I answer randomly.

Kokone then speaks in a bad-tempered voice to Haruaki, who had been watching with eyes half-open:

"…What, Haru?"

"No, nothing. I was just thinking that singing one's own praises is gross."

"…guys that only have jerseys at home are gross."

“What!? Don’t make fun of my Adidas jerseys!”

“I’m not making fun of Adidas. I’m making fun of you.”

I smile without thinking upon witnessing this exchange.

Lucky me. This means that my everyday life has returned enough so that such exchanges can take place.

In fact, I was on the verge of becoming unable to enjoy this anymore. The Sevennight in Mud may have been destroyed, but what happened while it was in effect has not disappeared. The fact that I confessed to Kokone didn’t disappear.

It’s all thanks to Maria’s quick-wittedness that I could return to my everyday life.

I think back to the risky exchange that took place in Mogi-san’s hospital room.

It was the afternoon of May 9th.

Mogi-san was sitting on her white bed, wearing the pajamas I had seen many times in the photograph on my mobile phone. Kokone was standing next to her with open hair today.

Both of them were scowling at me.

Of course I had taken notice of those gazes, so I stared at the mattress of the bed in order to avoid making eye contact. At the corner of my vision I could see Maria’s legs.

…Is this what you call a “battlefield?”

“I would appreciate an explanation, Hoshino-kun.”

I stiffened up to Mogi-san’s voice, which was razor sharp and calm at the same time.

“So you confessed to Koko-chan even though Otonashi-san was your girlfriend? What does this mean? I didn’t know you were such a careless boy…?”

Kokone had consulted her good friend Mogi-san about the confession.

As a result, we were called by her, and now we're here.

"Koko-chan had already told me that you seem to be on good terms with Otonashi-san… but judging from what I heard, I can only conclude that you're already going out, right?"

"Err…"

"……Why didn't you just say that you're going out?… I look stupid for thinking that we got on better terms recently…"

The sharpness disappeared slowly from Mogi-san's voice. Her expression clouded clearly.

"Explain it to us, Kazu-kun!"

Kokone said in anger.

"W-Well, umm… W-We-don't-see-s-each other, to begin with."

"You don't… what?! 'Seize' each other?! T-That's not what I asked! Leeewd…"

"No one would mishear it like that! You've got it wrong!"

"I can't believe you anymore! I'm amazed that you can say such a thing in front of Otonashi-san! Even though you call each other by the first name!"

Because we were being noisy in the hospital room, the glances focused on us. Not even the nurses dared to approach us and just watched us from far away. …Couldn't you come and rebuke us please?

Kokone took a big breath and looked with a serious face at Maria.

"…Do you have no issue with him? Why are you so composed, though Kazu-kun confessed to me?"

"Mh. …Well."

Maria crossed her arms to Kokone's words. She looked at me at a glance and curled her mouth slightly up. …I have a bad feeling.

"Disturbance because of his confession to Kirino… Of course there is none."

"…Why?"

"Because I made him do it."

Everyone was shocked. Of course, I'm included.

Umm, what did Maria just blurt out?

"……..What does this mean? Otonashi-san has tempted Kazu-kun to confess to me?"

“Exactly.”

“…K-Kazu-kun, what on earth?!” “Hoshino-kun, what’s the meaning of this?!”

No, I want to know that myself.

“Since Kazuki can’t explain it properly anyway, I’ll do the explanation.”

Maria’s mouth was still curled-up while she said so.

She’s definitely enjoying this situation…

“First, as a fact I have to mention right away, I got turned down by Kazuki.”

Kokone and Mogi-san looked at me with wide eyes. N-No, really, I don’t understand, too!

“Thinking back now, he said something like ‘I think nothing of a minor being like you’.”

There’s no way I’d say such a thing, is there?!

“What the… that’s too conceited, isn’t it? Kazu-kun should go die.”

“E-Even I found this repulsive just now, I think.”

“No, err……”

I wanted to make excuses, but since I don’t know what Maria’s up to, I couldn’t say anything.

“I couldn’t accept this harsh rejection readily. But well, if he had another person he likes, I would surely not give up, but I would accept the rejection. So I asked. If there is someone he likes.”

“A-And there he answered with his L-O-V-E for me!”

“Well yeah, after quite a long time of hesitating, he mentioned your name.”

Kokone reddened slowly while babbling “Ee, err”, upon hearing Maria’s words. Mogi-san turned contrastively blue, next to her. …this looks kinda like a traffic light.

“But listen, having heard Kirino’s name, I could still not fully believe him. Because they looked to me like mere friends. That’s why I urged him to confess to her in front of my eyes and that I would accept it if he had done so.”

“And so Hoshino-kun confessed to Koko-chan…”

Mogi-san murmured so, seeming close to tears. Kokone was still blushing and

looked worriedly at Mogi-san with a side-glance.

…hey, Maria, what are you scheming…?

“Well, but Kazuki has just now revoked his statement that he loves Kirino.”

“EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEHHHHH”

Kokone shouted out.

“K-Kokone, this is a hospital!”

“Shut up you damn capricious bastard.”

“……”

“In short. In the end, that he loved Kirino was just a random lie he told me in order to turn me aside. Being threatened by me to confess, he was already unable to retreat.”

“Mmh… I got the situation. But… But, but! I still think this is a bit cruel to me!”

“Doesn’t this indicate just how much he trusts you? Didn’t he believe that you, as a dear friend, would forgive him if he apologized?”

“Mmmmmmh…”

“Maybe he didn’t mind even if you misunderstood him, by any chance?”

“Eh?!”

Kokone turned red again.

…No, really, why did you add an unnecessary line there, Maria?

“But this does not change the fact that we involved you, Kirino. Kazuki and I regret what we have done. Please forgive us.”

“I-I’m really sorry…”

I felt the chance to apologize here. Kokone’s cheeks were still faintly red when she narrowed her eyes and looked at me.

“…..Have you reflected on your behavior?”

“Y-Yes. I’m sorry.”

Seeing me say words of reconsideration, Kokone pursed her lips and spoke.

“Got it! I’ll forgive you. But don’t do that a second time! No matter how much I’m used to confessions, even I got startled, you know! I worried so much about what I should do that I couldn’t sleep that night, you know!”

“So you’re used to confessions.”

“Hah! Within a single year since my school entrance I have easily reached double figures! …Ah, that doesn’t matter now! Have you reflected properly?!”

“S-Sorry. I have, properly…”

Kokone had raised a loud voice again, was smiling relieved.

She, too, had wished for our relationship to return.

If we preserve the everyday life everyone wishes for like this, it won’t be destroyed so easily.

“Okay then, I’ll go home.”

I said so and tried to leave the room after winking to Maria. …to be honest, I want to leave quickly because those many glances on us are pretty embarrassing.

“Wait a moment.”

“…What’s the matter, Mogi-san?”

“Umm, err… you dumped Otonashi-san, right? So I wondered why you are still together…? You really aren’t going out, right?”

Mogi-san asked with a trembling voice.

“Err… well, yeah.”

She looked alternately at me and Maria, and looked down.

“……Uuh, just watch! I’ll be discharged from the hospital in no time! I must quickly return to school. I’m uneasy… very uneasy…”

“D-Don’t worry, Kasumi! I’ll supervise him!”

Mogi-san went into a huff upon hearing Kokone’s words.

“…Koko-chan. You looked pretty happy when she said ‘Maybe he didn’t mind even if you misunderstood him by any chance’.”

“I-I didn’t!”

Mogi-san scowled at me with teary eyes for some reason.

“Hoshino-kun, you silly!”

“Uh…”

“Why did you do this false confession to Koko-chan and not to me?!”

Uuuh… does the problem lie there?

✵

Lunch break.

Maria and I were facing each other at a table in the school cafeteria. Maria was expressionlessly slurping some Ramen that tastes like gum.

Though she looked so happy back then when she ate strawberry tart. Well, but when I was about to take a photo unconsciously, she hit me seriously and continued eating with a grimace.

“Kazuki, will you come to my place today as well?”

The male student next to her spouted out his fried rice.

“I’m considering going to the library room today. What do you think?”

“I don’t mind.”

I visited Maria’s room in the last two days. It wasn’t really for fun, she just taught me because of the upcoming tests, since she’s by far the top student of our school.

But still, a second year student that’s taught by a first year…

“Mh, but she won’t come, huh. Can’t be helped, I’ll eat up the remaining stew, though it’s a bit much.”

“…it was tasty, honestly.”

“I haven’t asked for your impressions.”

She said coldly, although I took her into consideration.

“But still—”

Going to Maria’s room; if ‘she’ heard our conversion I bet she’d get moody.

Thinking about this, I recalled how ‘she’ always ate next to Maria until two weeks ago.

It’s almost as before. Mogi-san started pouting in the hospital and Daiya still ceases to speak with me, but I think I have regained a comfortable life.

However, Riko Asami and Ryuu Miyazaki do not exist in this everyday life anymore.

Our Golden Week had been prolonged for four days, so school didn’t start until May 11th. This is because the suspect of a murder incident went to this school. While we were resting, the principal of our school appeared on TV

and said something about Miyazaki-kun being an excellent and serious student.

The first day after holidays was a big fuss. It was such a pandemonium that some girls seriously cried and the media overran us with their cameras. It didn't look anything like the usual classroom scene anymore.

But after one week, the classroom was as before.

Our classmates declared that merely mentioning the name 'Ryuu Miyazaki' is a silent taboo. His name is indelibly associated with that murder incident, which leads to the unusual. For the sake of preserving the everyday life, not even his name may exist.

Of course I'm going to remember Miyazaki-kun. I won't be able to forget him. And still, Miyazaki-kun will not even appear in the conversations between the members of this class.

Miyazaki-kun cannot return to this everyday life anymore.

And it's not any different for his sister, Riko Asami.

At the moment this incident was announced, her place disappeared from here. Although not even their classmates knew that Riko Asami was the sister of Ryuu Miyazaki, it's now known all over the country. Her photo and address were uploaded to a giant bulletin board and she was entirely overran by the media and curious people, despite actually being the victims' family member.

Asami-san retired from school before we knew.

"Kazuki, what's the matter? You've got a distant look."

Maria asked me after completing her Ramen.

"Ah, no, it's nothing…"

"You recalled Asami, didn't you? …Geez, nothing else in your mind but girls."

"Don't phrase it so suggestively…"

Maria smiled contentedly, seeing my disturbance. I'm convinced now. She's a sadist. No, well, I knew that already long ago, though.

"You don't need to worry about Asami. You know this much, right?"

Maria said with her smile.

I, too, smiled unknowingly to those words and nodded.

Right, I don't worry about her.

I took my mobile phone and opened the most recent voice file.

“Good morning, Kazuki Hoshino-kun. Or should I say good day?”

This greeting that was exactly the same as her first. Except it wasn’t the voice of Kazuki Hoshino, but the one of a girl.

The voice of Riko Asami.

This file was created at 02:00 A.M. on May 6th according to the timestamp. Just about when Maria and I left the family restaurant. I don’t know when she had stolen my phone, but Maria unilaterally entrusted her with it.

For the sake of letting her leave me this message.

“What should I say? Maybe: I’m sorry for all the troubles? If you forgave me just with words, I’d say as much as you want. But I guess that’s not possible. You won’t forgive me, and I have done something of this magnitude.”

That’s not right at all. Resentment is a hindrance in the everyday life, after all.

“Similarly, I think that Nii-san’s sin will also never be forgiven, no matter how many punishments he may undergo. He may get 10, 20 or even more years in prison, but his sin won’t be forgiven when he leaves there. His deed was, while being for my sake, not right. I’m sure he will slowly notice the weight of his sin. I also think his heart is going to break several times. But you know? He will be alright! After all, Nii-san said ‘I made it in time’ while knowing of all this.”

Her voice was bright and didn’t give me the impression of a bluff at all.

Those were Asami-san’s true feelings, without doubt.

“I am alright, too. I finally realized it. I won’t lose sight of this anymore.”

She knew that she will have to go through great troubles. She knew already that she won’t be returning to this school a second time.

And even so, she said:

“I am Riko Asami.”

The message ended here.

I don’t know what kind of pains she will have to endure. But she will never call herself “no one” again.

Therefore, she’s going to be alright.

For sure.

Asami-san didn’t tell anyone where she’d gone—not even Maria. Thus,

there’s no real basis, but there is this rumor that I have heard a few times.

According to it, Riko Asami is living and working in a farm in Hokkaido.

I hope this is true. I hope she’s building a place for Miyazaki-kun to return to there.

That I’m convinced that she’s able to do it might be because I’m optimistic. But even so, I can believe.

I can believe that they will regain a life in which they can laugh happily together again.

“Aah, so you were together with Otonashi.”

I came to my senses again when I heard those words. I raised my head to this voice I had missed.

Daiya was standing in front of me.

Despite not having talked to me since he punched me, he sat down next to Maria as if nothing had happened.

…I-I wonder what’s the matter? Does he perhaps want to make peace with me? I hope so, but I don’t think he’d be able to say honestly so.

“Kazuki.”

“Y-Yeah?”

“I heard the reason for your inexplicable behavior!”

Maybe Kokone told him about what we talked in that hospital room?

Daiya grinned boldly at me, who was dumbfounded. At once, I noticed something. The piercing that was originally only attached to his left ear could now also be seen on his right one.

Daiya stated then:

“You’ve met O before, haven’t you?”

Author’s Notes

Good day, I’m Eiji Mikage.

I’m very sorry for the long delay since the first book came out. I actually wanted to get the sequel out as soon as possible since it wasn’t clear whether the story would continue given the contents of the first book… Honestly, I don’t even understand the reason for this long delay myself.

Well then, ‘Eiji Mikage’ is actually a penname. People ask me about the origin of this penname from time to time, but since it has no real significance, I always have trouble answering this question.

But even if there’s no special meaning to it, it’s still become my penname.

I’m known by this name within the editorial department and among the other authors. Almost none of them knows my real name. I even say “I’m the author Eiji Mikage” when I call the editorial department! That’s a bit iffy, now that I think about it…

Then I think that all my dear readers know only the name ‘Eiji Mikage’ of me.

It might be the faulty expression, but for the readers, ‘Eiji Mikage’ is no human but a book-writing machine. I’m only demanded to write amusing books.

I am still unable to nod firmly when I’m asked whether I give my everything for this sake. In order to become the ideal author for my readers, I still have to pull myself together more. That’s what I often think.

Okay, this time’s thank-you note.

Thanks to the illustrator 415 aka Tetsuo-san for those fantastic drawings. When we were talking about the second volume and I said “Kazuki gets handcuffed by Maria in underwear and a single white shirt!”, you told me your impressions right away, “You’re a pervert”. I will definitely not forget that.

My editor in charge, Kawamoto-san, thank you for sticking to me while I wrote this tangled story. It really helped me. The third volume may get even more complicated, so that will be troublesome for you, huh! *saying so as if I

wasn’t concerned*

Finally, thanks to all my dear readers that accompanied me up to this second book. I hope we can meet again in the third book.

See you another time!

- Eiji Mikage

Comments

Eiji Mikage
I live in Saitama. I arrive mostly an hour before my appointments at the meeting place. It’s sad to be alone.

Tetsuo
My name has changed from 415 to Tetsuo!
The person behind the name hasn’t changed, though!
Best regards /^o^\

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